

4

Canto I

Author
Schuld

Illustrator
Lansane

Min-Maxing
My TRPG
Build in
Another
World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson





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The Henderson Scale

- 9: Everything is as it should be and everyone enjoys a happy end to end all happy ends.
- 1: The dragon is slain, the princess is saved, and the adventurers raise up a toast at the pub.
- 0: For better or for worse, things go according to the GM and players' plans.
- 0.5: A tangent impacts the main story.
E.g. The party thinks of an unorthodox strategy and tries to put it into action. "I see. So you want to befriend the evil dragon to foil its plans."
- 0.75: A minor storyline takes the place of the main plot.
E.g. The GM jokingly plays along only to find the party is serious.
"What gender is the dragon? It's female, but why do you... What do you mean you're going to hit on her? Why?"
- 1.0: Some fatal mistake prevents the true ending from ever coming to fruition.
E.g. "So PC1 awakens to true love after trying to woo the dragon, accepting her perilous request to win her heart... No, hold on.
Why are you so eager to try this absurd quest? Huh? Have you even read Princess Kaguya? You know, I don't remember Princess Kaguya ever asking for the *head of your own damn king*."
- 1.25: The GM condemns his players but tries to figure out how to continue in their next session.
E.g. "I can't believe you're going to do this when there are members of your own party whose entire reason for being here is that they were trusted by the king to slay the evil dragon...
Come on, guys, say something."
- 1.5: The party intentionally wipes.
E.g. "Excuse me? You want new character sheets because this sounds more fun? What about this dumb dragon resonates with you so much?!"
- 1.75: The players commit genocide or otherwise move to bring the setting to its knees. The GM silently shuts his screen.
E.g. "Okay, fine. It was immature of me to jack up the stats of all the royal guards. But I don't understand why you're *this* motivated to see this through. Did you really need to go back and ask the evil dragon for legendary weapons?"
- 2.0: The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.
E.g. The GM packs his things without a word.
- Over: The realm of gods. Despite experiencing everything from 0.5 to 1.75, the players continue on for whatever reason—and somehow progress the story. After an unknowable amount of time, the characters find some new objective and dutifully complete it.
E.g. "And so, the evil dragon realizes the power of true love after she and PC1 slay the rightful king. They turn the castle ruins into their newlywed nest of love and live happily with their battle-tested friends... Look. You guys understand that this was just meant as a stand-in until we got to the next campaign, right? Are you seriously trying to get me to write more material for this party? Hm? What's that?
You want me to hand out *experience points*?"

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Munchkin

1: A childish player who throws fits to try and gain every advantage they can for their PC.

2: A player who prefers to enjoy the act of building up a strong character over fleshing out their place in the world. These players staunchly uphold the rules on their quest for invincibility. Also known as a Japanese munchkin.



Preface

Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TRPG)

An analog version of the RPG format utilizing paper rulebooks and dice.

A form of performance art where the GM (Game Master) and players carve out the details of a story from an initial outline.

The PCs (Player Characters) are born from the details on their character sheets. Each player lives through their PC as they overcome the GM's trials to reach the final ending.

Nowadays, there are countless types of TRPGs, spanning genres such as fantasy, sci-fi, horror, modern chuanqi, shooters, postapocalyptic, and even niche settings such as those based on idols or maids.

There was no pain, no weariness. How long had it drifted in this endless space of mellow warmth? With every breath, a soft tickle came up its nose and into its brain, sending the ego deeper and deeper into the viscous, gentle sea.

Unburdened by even the recognition of its own sleepful state, the self was composed not of a string of thoughts, but by primal *being*.

Though it assumed its amoebic experience would continue forever, the end eventually came. Like the sudden sensation of cold that sets in after soaking too long in a lukewarm bath, the consciousness was ripped free from the sunken place where it had settled.

At last, the sleeping ego was freed from its restraints. It knew. It knew that it had a body. That its body had a core, and that from this core full of beating organs came arms and legs. That the cradle it called a brain resided in a head attached to this core. And, of course, that it was an instance of what one might consider the quintessential humanfolk race: it was a mensch.

Memories bubbled up, jumbling together as they surfaced, becoming me. *I* knew that I had been born on a planet third in orbit from its sun, in the country of Japan to the far east. I knew that I had lived a little more than thirty years before spleen cancer ended my time as Fukemachi Saku.

And I knew more. I knew that I had kept those memories when I had been born in the southwestern canton of Konigstuhl in the Trialist

Empire of Rhine—that I was Erich, the fourth son of Johannes.

That's right... I wasn't some prokaryote destined to drown in the muck of repose, with no concept of life or death. I was a person—one fortunate enough to get a second character sheet.

As my self congealed, so too did my memories.

My life in Konigstuhl, and the unbreakable bond I'd formed with Margit. My beloved sister Elisa, her kidnapping, and the subsequent revelation of her changeling nature. The cautious laws our nation used to control unchecked dangers, and the path she had needed to take to remain Elisa of Konigstuhl, as opposed to state property. The methuselah who opened that path by employing me and teaching Elisa, Agrippina du Stahl.

My first time leaving the canton. The manor we stopped by, the fateful encounter, and the unforgettable pain of farewell.

The glorious streets of the capital. The raven-black castle, and the bizarre workings of the Imperial College.

The hustle of trying to earn my sister's tuition. Mika becoming my first friend outside of the canton. Inviting him to Wustrow, the doorway to the north, for a minor errand. Searching for a stubborn old treant. Finding out that Sir Feige just didn't suit his line of work.

A coincidental sighting, and the lifelong oath of friendship that followed, creating a night that was a secret all our own.

And finally...the woods we entered to win Sir Feige's tome, and our first-ever ichor maze cleared. The relentless zombies, the exhaustion, the bleeding, and the pain. The humbling realization of inexperience and the exhilarating recognition of strength that preceded my first-ever fight with a swordsman stronger than me.

What had happened at the end of that desperate struggle as I grazed against the void of death? In an instant of eternity, the world whirled around me.

I have to wake up. Powerful will lifted my heavy eyelids...to a scene it would be criminal to describe.

"Up early, are we?"

By which I mean I awoke to see Ursula before me with her privates as dubiously protected as ever. Despite her hair being her only covering, and even then only at certain angles, the svartalf hadn't a hint of shame standing on top of my face with her bare legs.

She planted her feet on either side of my nose and placed a hand on each hip, announcing to the world that she was not in a good mood. The smile on her face made her ever more terrifying.

"I don't think it's very nice to walk on someone's face."

"This is what happens when you ignore another's considerate warning, O Beloved One."

The ill-mannered svartalf fluttered her wings and took to the air,

only to come back down and plant her ass on the bridge of my nose. No, *that's not what I meant. The walking part wasn't the important bit.*

"I'd like you to get off my face," I said plainly.

"I happen to think this is a fitting outcome for someone who runs into harm's way despite my wise counsel. Don't you?"

Ursula's slender legs reached over to poke at my mouth to reprimand me for talking back to her. I put up with it for a while, but eventually grew annoyed and tried to scare her by opening wide like I was going to bite. Unfortunately, she just started kicking my tongue instead, so I gave up. I had no intention of leaving teeth marks on my tiny, silver-haired friend, even as a joke.

After giving up on removing the weight from my face, I finally realized that I'd been strapped into bed.

"...Was I out for a long time?"

"Not particularly," Ursula said. "No, not at all. The doctor's medicine only put you to sleep for a mere five days."

Five days?! I've been unconscious for five days since Sir Feige knocked me out?!

"I hid away and listened in on the diagnosis. Apparently, you were in quite the sorry state, Beloved One. Your body was in tatters, and your mind was pulling all sorts of tricks to ignore the pain. Any worse and you would have been disabled for life."

Hearing what was wrong with me in such definite terms scared the living hell out of me. She was basically telling me I'd been ignoring the warning signs of pain thanks to the rush of battle, and every step I'd taken had come with its own constitution check. Finding out that a single unlucky roll could have killed me on the spot didn't help at all; it just scared me.

"Honestly," Ursula sighed. "You can't go around risking your life when we can't help you. What exactly do you think I gave you these lips for? Mortals are so quick to run off and die as soon as we look away. How will I gaze at these pretty eyes of yours if they're buried in the dirt?"

Still upset, she deftly twirled around on my nose without getting up and set to pinching my eyelids with her toes. Tears welled up from the pain, but I resigned myself to my scolding...even though deep down I felt that no adventurer would have turned back from a warning so deep into a quest.

That said, I was surprised to see her: if I'd been out for five days, that meant the False Moon had just begun to wax. Taking a better look, I saw that Ursula was two sizes smaller than usual, and the dreamy glimmer of her hair wasn't as brilliant as before. What little I could see beyond the curtains pointed to night; for her to be so unimpressive when the stage was set for her clearly showed that she

was pushing her boundaries.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “And thanks for worrying about me.”

There are two things you owe to someone who strains themselves to visit you at your sickbed: apologies and gratitude. As tired as I was, I hadn’t fallen so low as to forget my basic manners.

Ursula’s dainty eyes blinked in awe. After a moment, she managed to digest what I’d said and finally nodded in acceptance.

“I still have plenty I want to say, but that was all I wanted to hear. I shall keep the rest to myself.”

The fairy’s wings fluttered again, sending her up with a faint shimmer trailing behind. As she took flight, the restraints that had kept me from falling out of bed in my animated sleep undid themselves.

Freed from both the weight on my face and my bindings, I sat up and found that my body was surprisingly light, in spite of having slept for five days.

I’d slept for a good two weeks straight during the dreadful treatment of my first life’s terminal illness, and I’d atrophied to the point of not being able to sit up by the time I’d opened my eyes. The contrast was astonishing; perhaps the healing spells were to thank.

Furthermore, neither my clothes nor my hair were filthy messes. Some kind soul must have regularly cast Clean on me—it was a blessing that magic had a way of getting rid of grime all without unclothing or setting foot in a bath.

I carefully dragged myself out of the blankets I’d warmed with my comatose body. I tested my fingers to find them as Dexterous as ever, and I could feel the cold of approaching winter on my legs. I bent my knees, rolled my ankles around, and wiggled my toes to make sure I hadn’t lost any motor control.

Slowly, I brought my feet down to the floor and tightened my lower half; I stood up with a gentle rock, but was unmet by any undesirable surprise.

I could hardly believe I’d been laying in bed for five days, from how robust the trunks holding me up felt. My body wasn’t cold, pale, or lifeless; I’d surmounted certain death without losing anything.

“Yes... Yes! I can move! I made it! Eat shit!”

“Who in the world are you cursing at?” Ursula asked. “If it’s the God of Trials, I suggest you stop. Your excitement will only serve to spur Him on.”

If I had to direct these words somewhere, it would be the incompetent GM the universe called fate. What kind of moron would send an unfinished party without an all-important healer into a dungeon like that without even giving us time to prepare?!

Yet in the end, I’d managed to survive. Every enemy in our path

considered themselves the true PC1 as they walked this world devoid of deliberate level design, but I was still breathing.

What could I do if not celebrate? Falling in battle alongside the final boss could be a beautiful conclusion in fiction, but a rough-cut adventurer's definition of victory included the trip home. My career aspirations were further boosted by the immediate goal of earning Elisa's tuition, making this point doubly true.

"Wait, what about Mika?"

The tall, aromatic room housed more than just one bed, but the one in front of me was empty. I turned around to see that the cot to my bed's left had a person-sized bump.

I approached on silent footsteps and found my friend sleeping blissfully. He was on his side, clutching at the edge of his blanket to keep warm, and his long, deep breaths were devoid of any sign of mental anguish.

Although I couldn't quite see clearly in the darkness, my old chum's hair sticking out from underneath the covers looked longer than I remembered. Was I imagining things?

"Your little friend had a much better time waking, and even has the doctor's permission to walk," Ursula informed me. "You're a full two days late."

Thank the gods. Mika recovered even faster than I did. Seeing him bleed out of his ears had caused me to worry that his condition was more critical than mine, but it turned out that my physical strain had earned me an extra two days of immobility. Regardless, I was happy to hear that he was now well enough to stand on his own two legs.

My hand reached out to his hair before I could think. At some point, I'd unconsciously begun to fear that his good health was but a dream, and wanted some kind of tactile feedback to confirm its authenticity.

Mika's breathing was so slow and steady that it put me at ease just by listening. When I combed through his locks with my hand, they slipped between my fingers like running water.

...Huh? Wait, I swear your hair is longer. That, and wasn't it wavier before?

Totally oblivious to the fact that playing with my sleeping friend's hair without consent made me a freak, I thoughtlessly continued toying with it with one hand and placed the other on my chin to think. Ursula landed on my shoulder with a sigh and eyed me like I was some kind of irredeemable beast.

"I'd hate to interrupt your fun, but now that you're awake, I ask that you take some of the responsibility for your actions."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

The sudden mention of responsibility I didn't know I had caused

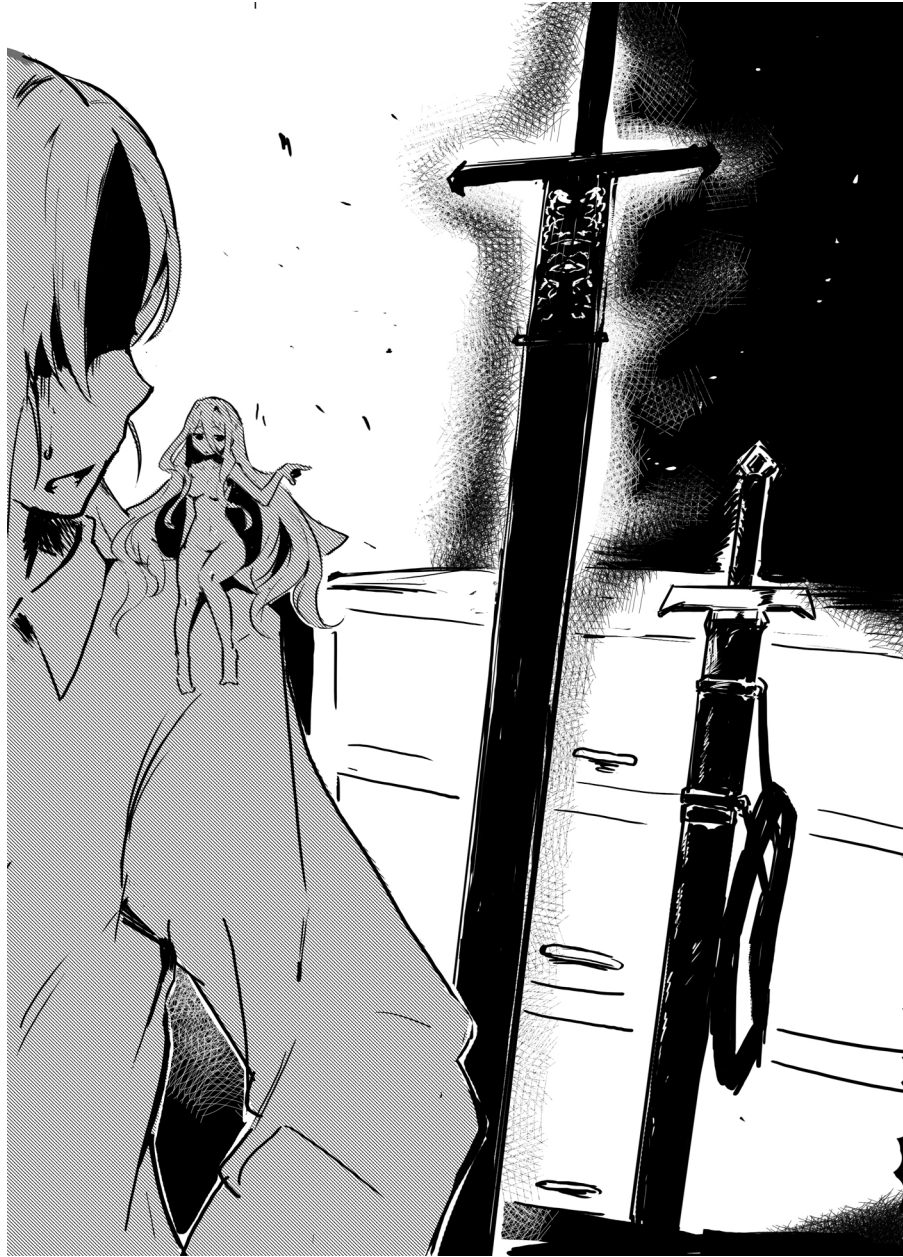
my fingers to stop, and the glossy strands of hair slipped from my grasp. I stared at her in confusion. Ursula shook her head and shrugged before pointing to the drawer at my bedside.

“—?!”

I was so shocked that I forgot I was in a hospital and screamed—but no sound came out. Judging from the “Is this boy stupid?” look that Ursula was giving me, she had been kind enough to stop me.

Beside the bed I’d been snoozing in were *two* swords. One was Schutzwolfe: my trusty partner had been neatly propped up, snugly wrapped in leather. The problem lay with the other, similarly familiar blade haphazardly leaning on the dresser beside her, undressed by the modesty of a sheath.

The cursed sword that I’d sent to the ends of the universe was sitting there as if doing so was its god-given right.



Ursula didn't need to use her fey magicks this time: my lips trembled up and down, but not a single word came out. Seeing me soak in the sight of the chunk of darkness that shone darker than the lightless night utterly stupefied must have been a marvel of comedy.

"You sure have wooed a difficult one," Ursula said. "I'll have you know it took a lot of effort to make sure she didn't get up to any trouble while you were asleep."

The svartalf sighed with the gravity of a student trying to get the class clown to stop acting up. *Uh, I don't think this is as laid-back as you're making it out to be...*

Why was it here? I'd wrung out every last drop of my mana to send it to the endless grave of faraway *somewhere*.

"I'm not entirely sure of the specifics," she explained. "After all, this blade is even older than I. In fact, I'm doubtful we could find many as ancient as her."

With that shiver-inducing foreword out of the way, Ursula went on to break down the general gist of things. Apparently, alfar could roughly interpret the whims of such living banes. As a mensch, I could only pick up on the raw emotions they radiated...but having an interpreter wasn't enough to make me want this bothersome blight of a blade.

According to Ursula, the sword of damnation had spawned the ichor maze in search of a new master. It had desired a warrior fit to wield it: the challenger had to be as strong or stronger than its previous partner. Hearing that all that had been caused by this evil weapon's tantrum locked my jaw agape.

"She wants love: *to* love and *to be* loved... She seems to have been acting out of courtship, as distressing as that may be for a mortal."

Suddenly, a voiceless scream clawed at the back of my mind in disagreement. Needless to say, the source was the relic of unclassifiable danger.

I have no idea how to describe the "sounds" it was making. I heard a cacophony of voices swirl together with screeching glass and metal; the meaningless noise of it all paradoxically injected meaning alone into my psyche.

It was never meant to be heard by the fleshy sacks that walked about the planet. Perhaps that was why my disgruntled brain chose to interpret the sword's intent in such a horrid way.

"You may claim you cause no distress all you like," Ursula retorted, "but even *we* are closer to fleeting life than you."

"Hold on," I said. "Do you have any idea how many people died in that labyrinth? I'm sure there were even more than I saw that couldn't even be resurrected as zombies... I'm sorry, but there's no chance I can

use a sword with that kind of terrible power!”

“But she’s saying that she doesn’t know anything about the undead.”

“Excuse me?”

Ursula continued translating the splintering creaks entering my soul for me. Apparently, the sword itself hadn’t commanded the power to raise the dead; no, that had been caused by the regrets of her former master as he cradled it in death.

The sword itself had birthed the ichor maze to beckon in challengers, but claimed that the zombies and thematic riddles strewn about everywhere had arisen from the late adventurer’s personal obsessions. His attachment had given the concentrated ichor direction, recycling those he felled into further trials of might...until a dungeon was born.

Come to think of it, the journal I’d skimmed through had ended with the adventurer confessing his greatest regret: that he had failed to find a successor to entrust his beloved sword to.

What a pair of lovebirds! Go get a room and lock yourselves in forever!

My heartfelt lament failed to reach anyone else, and the dispassionate explanation continued.

Barring its sentience, the blade itself didn’t have any notable powers...that is, other than its ability to return to its wielder’s side.

The sword boasted the same capabilities as the famous divine blades littering the myths of my previous world. I had no idea how something so magnificent could end up exuding such a deathly aura. *Is this okay? Can we trust it?* I was sure that wielding it would eat at my mind; I mean, just *listening* to it mandated a SAN roll.

Ursula went on to elaborate that the accursed blade had used its homebound property to its fullest extent in order to escape the infinite elsewhere of my portal and end up at my bedside. But, you know, I wasn’t quite a fan of being recognized as its wielder without my consent.

No—no way. I don’t need this thing.

“But these sorts of beings are the type to chase you around until the end of time...or space, in this case,” the svartalf said. “You aren’t to go around selling her over and over again to earn extra coin. Am I clear?”

I wasn’t the sort of fool to go around selling invisible knives all my life. Rather, I couldn’t even imagine what kind of lunatic would want to buy something this atrocious in the first place. If I were a buyer, I wouldn’t care how rare or strong the thing was; you couldn’t pay me to take it.

“You may not wish to hear this,” Ursula added, “but I think it

pays to know when to fold.”

If a mensch—or at the very least, a mortal being—had said this to me, I might have been able to swallow this truism. But hearing it from an undying phenomenon given consciousness felt like pure mockery.

Sure, I’d gotten this far by accepting some losses. I may not have had control over my hair and eyes, but I’d gotten used to my dealings with alfar—I would go so far as to say it wasn’t all bad.

However, this unadulterated consolidation of wrongness was a different thing entirely. Yes, I had played plenty of characters with literal evil double-edged blades, where I’d found loopholes to use my demerits to my advantage. Yes, I had enjoyed dragging my family in—looking back, they’d all been amazing sports—as I role-played the emotional struggle of wielding such a weapon. But to do it for real was out of the question.

Besides, what the hell was its deal? What did a sword want out of love? What did that even mean? Was I supposed to cradle it to bed every night? Was I supposed to lick it clean?

“Um...” Ursula frowned. “Whenever love comes up, she starts speaking incredibly quickly and it’s honestly rather disturbing...”

The sharp pain of displeasure had stabbed my inner skull; apparently, the sword was chatting up a blue streak. While it was only natural to become livelier when discussing a favorite subject, this was extreme. I would have appreciated it if it quit compressing all its emotions into high-frequency waves that bounced around in my skull.

Barraged by innumerable brainwaves, I grew woozy to the point of nausea. Just as the world began to spin...the assault lightened. I put a hand to my head to temper the lingering headache, and the other remained planted on the bed frame to secure my balance; suddenly, the latter hand began to glow.

More precisely, the ice-blue gem planted in my lunar ring was gleaming. Even after I’d killed her, even after she’d disappeared in my arms, Helga was watching over me. Although she couldn’t block everything, the stinging pain softened considerably. Listening to this “voice” for too long was sure to grind away my sanity, so I was terribly thankful that it was quieter now.

Whether Ursula knew of my plight or not, she continued interpreting the toxic current of meaning without my asking. Hearing her clarify small bits at a time was a serious threat to my well-being on its own. *Stop! Don’t tell me any more! Just let me sleep!*

Helga’s memory did its best, but covering my ears did little to interrupt the constant voices. Even so, I wished that someone would plug them up just to give me some small feeling of security.

There was a good chance Ursula was only translating because she would otherwise be the one eating the brunt of the sword’s ill will.

Unenthused, she explained that for a sword to love, it simply needed to fulfill its purpose to the best of its ability. To offer its wielder an eternally sharp blade that would never chip, bend, or break was its ode of affection.

While its offerings were simple, the dark blade certainly did epitomize what it meant to be a sword.

In this day and age, a sword was a symbol: around the waist, adorned with golds and silvers, it was a marker of authority. However, at its inception, the sword had been a tool to better slay one's enemies. Thus, the accursed darkness professed its love by means of unparalleled quality to that end.

It cut through the hardest metals without a chip of its own, never succumbing to the force of an enemy blade. It returned to its wielder's hand in an instant if they so willed it, never to be stolen away by another.

An impeccable edge, indestructible body, and everlasting loyalty were certainly the magnificent traits I expected from the Ascalons and Fragarachs of the world; strangely enough, though, my excitement to wield the thing remained stuck at rock bottom. It was effectively a sword of legend, so why was it so...*this*? Was this what it meant to say that stats can lie?

At any rate, the question of what it meant for a sword to love had been answered; next came what it meant for a sword to be loved. As one might expect, this was simply to be used as a sword: to kill one's enemies. It followed that the depth of one's love was expressed through the art of swordplay; after all, mastery was a bud that could only blossom at the end of a long road called dedication.

Swords are weapons. While they can be used to steal, save, or protect, in the grand scheme of things these objectives are all secondary to the act of killing whoever stands in their wielders' ways. They are but one of many products originating from mankind's long quest for blood.

In the end, a sword's purpose had never been to garnish a nobleman's belt, nor to rest sheathed atop a fireplace as an unused emblem of peace. To sum it all up, this black lump of doom wanted me to go around slashing people to bits. *I knew this thing was a psycho.*

The throbbing grew more pronounced: apparently, it wanted me to try holding it. They say you shouldn't knock it till you try it, but...

"I don't wanna. I feel like it'll make me sick."

"Would it hurt to at least keep your imagined side effects to curses?"

The warbled messages bullied my mind further, and I finally gave up, knowing that leaving it be would do nothing to improve my situation. I warily reached out and curled my fingers around the

handle.

Much to my chagrin, the sword was splendid. The grip clung tight, yet it was counterintuitively trivial to roll around in my hand. Its center of mass was concentrated in the center, but the tip boasted solid weight; I could surely swing it with great speed if I ever got the hang of it. The shining dark luster tapered off into edges fine enough to cut the cold air of late autumn in two. Ignoring the overpowering dread for a moment, it was as aesthetically marvelous as it was powerful.

Being a lengthy zweihander, I wouldn't be able to handle it with the same grace I did Schutzwolfe—on account of my countless add-ons for one-handed weapons—but I couldn't deny that the sword was superb.

"Hm?"

As I inspected it all over to try and find a flaw, I noticed gold lettering engraved into the hilt. The ancient text was mostly illegible due to wear, but it seemed to be in a language that was adjacent to Rhinian—perhaps its parent tongue. Of all the words, I could only recognize one: "crave."

Amidst the indecipherable string of characters was the will of sheer desire. Being forged with hunger, thirst, and a pining spirit had likely been why the thing was so mad. For now, I decided to dub it the Craving Blade.

At this point, I was out of options. If the thing could find its way back to me after I sent it to gods-know-where, there wasn't much else I could do. Had it just showed back up on my doorstep after I'd tossed it in the local dump, I would've taken the challenge head-on and started looking for active volcanoes, but this was too much.

Although I had to say, the thought of disposing of a cursed item in a volcano was certainly captivating. I already knew someone with pointy ears—though she'd probably shoot me with a bow if I dared to make the comparison—so I just needed to find dvergar and floresiensis pals to make the trip.

Leaving my escapist fantasies aside, the point was that I could no longer handle this situation on my own. Something of this level called for Lady Agrippina or Lady Leizniz—or perhaps Sir Feige could help. I couldn't exactly sleep off the mana costs of blowing it to kingdom come every time it showed up, so my only option was to put up with it for a while.

I tossed the damned thing aside in a fit of despair—I *felt* it complain, but couldn't care less—and crawled back into bed.

"My, sleeping again, Beloved One?"

"I'm emotionally exhausted," I answered. "Sing me a lullaby, will you?"

I'd meant it as a sulking joke, but Ursula fulfilled my request with a snicker. She gently landed atop my head and sang like a midnight breeze.

"O quiet night—O gentle night."

Hers was a kind voice. It conveyed that indescribable feeling of staring up at the stars with a cigarette in my mouth after a long night of overtime work. I relived a scene with the tender glow of a watchful moon and a cool gust of wind that wicked sweat off my weary brow.

Amidst all the fatigue and stress, that had been a true moment of respite.

Was it because she was an elf of the night? I squeezed my pillow tight, its herbal fragrance clinging to my nose. A long sigh escaped my lips, full of intertwining relief and nostalgia.

"O moonlit night—let your caring arms of light hold us—let sleeping souls rest."

I may have found myself saddled with an unwelcome burden, but perhaps this song could count amongst my rewards.

No, in fact, it surely did. I'd just finished sleeping for eons, but I truly felt like I was going to enjoy this next slumber.

Oh, I forgot. I never checked how much experience I earned for all this...

"Good night, Beloved One," Ursula whispered. "Don't forget to rely on us next time."

...but that can wait for tomorrow.

[Tips] While rare, sentient tools are widely known to exist. Although some are heralded as friends to people for their command of mortal tongues, there is no guarantee that their values line up in any way. They are not animals, nor are they spirits; least of all are they people.

Let only those whose hearts have never skipped a beat upon seeing a girl come back from summer break cuter than she was before throw the first stone.

"Hey, old pal... Um, uh, it's kind of embarrassing to have you stare like that."

To say that I was looking at a new person would be an understatement. Nothing fundamental had changed: the morning sun still left a halo upon raven-black hair, and the golden ratio remained ever present in the perfect arrangement of Mika's face.

However, I was now met with a rounder nose, with plumper lips, with a gentler jawline, and with the slight differences in shadows that came from those changes. The arc connecting neck to shoulder was more slender, as were the contours of the lithe arms that extended like

willow branches from it. Lithe legs with unpronounced knees stretched from rounded hips, speaking to an undeniable change in appearance.

The friend who had woken me up was a full-fledged *maiden*.

"Oh, uh," I stammered. "Sorry. Er, well, how do I put this..."

"Put what?"

Mika smiled bashfully as he—wait, she? Anyway, she smiled bashfully as she played with her relatively straightened hair. *So this is what I thought was off last night.*

"Uh... Um..." I searched for words to put in my mouth. "You've gotten a lot cuter?"

"You think? I feel like I haven't really changed at all."

Watch your mouth, old chum. Claiming that *this* was the result of zero change was sure to rouse all the ladies of the world to throw things on stage in protest; I would of course step in as a shield, but even I wouldn't be able to deny their righteousness.

Between sexes, Mika had exhibited a cryptic beauty that played to both male and female allure, but that had been replaced with unmistakable girlish charm. What boyishness remained amounted to less than that of a tomboy, and the usual temptation to stray off the beaten path—as crass as this turn of phrase may be—had turned into straightforward appreciation of an adorable girl.

"Do... Do you think I've changed too much?"

Mika's voice was equal parts reproachful for my unrestrained staring and anxious about something yet unseen. Although I suspected he—ah, crap, *she*—wasn't doing this on purpose, her head was tilted, lips slightly pointed, and her fingers were fidgeting as she waited for an answer. Combined, her mannerisms compelled both my sense of protectiveness and an uninvited desire to tease her.

"As if," I said. "Don't you remember what I told you, old chum?"

The devil on my shoulder kept blabbing about the psychological effect of cute aggression, but the angel on the other side managed to hold firm and punch its counterpart's mouth shut. The angel then grabbed the devil by the collar and slammed its head down on the floor a few dozen more times, just in case.

"I'll always be your friend, no matter what you look like or what kind of world we live in. Everything I said that night is as true now as then."

I took Mika's hands tightly in mine and bumped my forehead against hers. Her lashes were longer than before, and the corners of her eyes drooped more gently, yet the intelligent eyes that shone at their center remained unchanged.

Through those windows I could see her dignified soul. No matter how the vessel changed, it was the enduring person within that I held

in such esteem.

“Or what?” I asked. “Do you take me for a flimsy sweet-talker who’d go back on his word at the slightest change of appearance?”

“...Heh, as if,” Mika replied. “Thanks, old pal.”

We unclasped our hands and moved them to each other’s backs for a good hug. The warmth I could feel beyond our clothes hadn’t changed one bit since that fateful night. Her shoulders were narrower and the smell tickling my nose was now as sweet as the herbal incense in the air, but none of it had any bearing on our bond.

After a decent while, we both loosened our grips and shared a shy chuckle. We laughed at ourselves and joked about how this wasn’t a moment to share in broad daylight to ease the embarrassment.

“But you know,” Mika added, “it might’ve been fun if *you* were the one sweet-talking me.”

“Ghft!” I sputtered. “That joke is a bit risqué...”

“Ha ha, forgive me, old pal. The physical changes affect my thinking too, and all. Anyway, messing around is fun, but let’s get to eating breakfast already.”

Still flustered by my unchanging friend’s changed nature, I took the meal Mika handed me. She’d gone to fetch our food before waking me, and the iatrurge had apparently prescribed a plain porridge with an offensively small amount of garum sauce to flavor it. On the side was a single salted plum to sate my desire for savory food. Frankly, it was dismally lacking...

“Don’t look at me like that, Erich.”

I’d been staring at Mika’s tray: she had a classic imperial breakfast of bread, wurst, and butter. Alas, her voice was stern, and she went so far as to hide her meal behind her back to drive home the point that she wasn’t going to share.

“I know it doesn’t feel like it, but you’ve been out for six days,” she explained. “The healer said your gut will just throw everything back up if you eat solids right away.”

Mika followed the doctor’s orders to a tee and forced me to take the sad breakfast, despite my objections. Ah, but I did know what she was talking about: it was the fate of many a survivor lost at sea or in the wild. Iatrurges could prevent muscular atrophy while laying in bed, but even they couldn’t reach in to fix my gut; this world was such a mixed bag of convenience and hassle.

“Today’s the first day I’ve gotten to eat solids myself,” she went on. “Put up with it for now, okay?”

Also of note was that Mika’s voice had changed as well. What had once been a boyish soprano now rang higher than ever before. And here I’d thought she’d remain androgynous no matter which way her body shifted.

This made me look forward to seeing her as a boy. I had no doubt he'd be a handsome lad that would draw stares from ladies passing by—all the more reason I couldn't let Lady Leizniz discover him. Mika ticked two of the wraith's boxes—in the worst case, an encounter might leave her with a new box to tick—and I could seriously imagine her starting an all-out battle over the young tivisco.

Hrm... I kind of wanted to see that, but also kind of didn't. Both the nations of Earth and the histories of Rhine had records of ludicrous wars waged over beautiful women, but even so, they were absurd enough to get rarer and rarer as time progressed.

I imagined the conflict between a pervert trying to dress up a cute kid and a decent master trying to protect their student. Depending on what was said, I could see either side exploding in a fit of rage and reigniting the cadre wars.

If that were to happen, fully capable magia would be pitted against each other; keeping the death toll to a few dozen would probably be the *best-case* scenario. Eventually, that would necessitate the crown's involvement, and that would then cause the whole ordeal to go down in the official records.

Surely, neither the historians of tomorrow nor the diplomats of today would have an easy time of it: the former would struggle to decipher the preposterous events that the latter would so despondently labor to write in a manner befitting of the imperial court.

“...Old pal? The porridge won't finish itself, you know?”

“Huh? Oh, right.”

Mika implicitly chided me for staring again, so I hurriedly lifted my spoon. I couldn't taste the food—though only in small part due to its flavor—but I knew I couldn't just stay surprised about my friend's changes forever. While I'd already resigned myself to being shocked again in two months' time, I planned to get along with her for long enough that I'd have the time to get used to it.

Besides, I wasn't going to forget my own words: Mika was Mika, no matter the details.

My bland breakfast was finished in the blink of an eye. As an aside, I'd chucked the evil sword underneath my bed before Mika had gotten up—the pulsing emotion was markedly unhelpful for my remaining headache, but I managed to grit my teeth and ignore it—so she didn't have to deal with any mental attacks as she took away our trays.

“Okay,” she said, returning and sitting on her own bed, “the healer says we have to stay put here for another ten days.”

Apparently, the ability to walk was oftentimes a false sign of wellness. In primeval times, life had equated sickly stillness with

death, and our bodies had developed an instinctive mechanism to wake themselves as a result. Thought of in this way, this seemed like a reasonable concern to have.

“We have to spend another ten days in this vat of incense?” I groaned. “I’m going to be bored to tears.”

“Oh, and I don’t think I need to say this, but you’re not allowed to exercise either.”

“Blegh.” I stuck out my tongue and Mika flicked my forehead with a spell.

The way she smiled at me like a troublesome child was picturesque. A normal boy in the midst of puberty would cause incident after incident just to see this expression again.

“But I’ll get rusty,” I protested. “Have you ever heard this saying? ‘One day of rest and you will know; two days of rest and your master will know; and—’”

“‘Three days of rest and everyone will know,’ right?” Mika concluded. “I get it, but this is for the best. The math on sacrificing the rest of your life for one day of training just doesn’t add up. Also, the incense you’re complaining about is for our sakes too. The healer said it’s to fix our lungs.”

“This is medicine?”

“Yeah. You can’t just slather medicine on our throats and lungs, right? That’s why they mix it into the air instead, so it can slowly heal us as we breathe.”

All this time, I’d thought the fragrant candles served the same purpose as the herbs dangling from the ceiling: pretentious artistry. Magic and lowly mages alike loved to embellish their dwellings with this sort of pageantry. I mean, even *Lady Agrippina* went through the trouble of setting up the (probably) pointless gimmick of turning her atelier into a garden.

Regardless, airborne treatment sounded expensive; just how philanthropic was Sir Feige? He didn’t seem the stingy type, so I doubted he’d hit us with a bill after giving us his word otherwise, but thinking about the total cost of care sent chills down my spine.

I better go thank him later...

“Oh, I almost forgot! Here, I have a letter for you.”

Out of the blue, Mika pulled out a letter from her bedside dresser. The wax-sealed envelope was trimmed with golden foil, and was courteously addressed to “Mr. Erich of Konigstuhl Canton” in elegant cursive.

I only knew of one individual who could pen an address so gracefully on an envelope prestigious enough to warrant several days of hard work for an average laborer. The coat of a silver leaf stamped into the wax was the inviolable proof of aristocracy: this had to be Sir

Feige's reward.

I giddily ran a knife across the top and heard a small popping sound. For a brief moment, I could see the remnants of magic; the treant might've rigged the letter with a terrible curse had anyone else opened it.

"You sure seem eager to open it," Mika pointed out. "Is it...a love letter? Never mind, it doesn't look like one."

"This is better than that," I said. "Come on, old chum. You should be just as excited as me. This is none other than our reward!"

I slapped the spot on the bed next to me to invite her to read with me, and it turned out that she'd been hiding how curious she was, judging by the skip in her step. Her running form was also remarkably more feminine, but perhaps that was an intentional choice. Otherwise, maybe her brain was naturally geared to act out the gender archetype befitting of her current sex, in which case, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that Mika's sexual shifts literally changed her brain.

Although frankly, that was beside the point. What worried me more was the softness of her shoulder against mine and the sweetness that had yet refused to abandon my nose...

"What's wrong?"

I froze for a moment and Mika peered into my eyes. I told her not to worry about it—I wasn't doing a very good job of hiding it, so she probably knew exactly what was wrong—and pulled out the letter from its container.

...Wow, that's hard!

"Ugh," Mika groaned, "court process palatial writing?"

The letter was written in an especially formal branch of palatial language known as court process. Letters fit for the Emperor were always written this way, combining delicate complexities with roundabout euphemisms to conjure up a style that was infamous for its difficulty.

"This is amazing," she marveled. "Wow, whenever a letter shows up, it's a perfect copy of all the other ones."

"It really is something," I agreed. "Wait, look. All the text is set so that every letter is an equal distance apart. This is gorgeous."

The master scrivener lived up to his name. Gazing at Sir Feige's masterpiece—it was no longer something I could deride as a mere letter—I could see why his transcriptions could be valued more highly than the originals they mimicked.

Yes, indeed, the lettering was breathtaking. The lettering was without flaw, but...

"Hey, old chum?"

"Stop, old pal. I know what you're about to say, and no, I only know the very basics of court process writing."

“Ah... Me too.”

We were a servant without noble tutelage and a fledgling College student. The letter was too difficult for us. If I weren't already aware that complexity of grammar and speech was a sign of respect in high society, I would've thought this to be a mean-spirited prank.

To draw a comparison, this would be like taking an elementary schooler who'd just finished learning all their ABCs and handing them a handwritten Shakespearean manuscript. It was technically the same language and the same letters, but it felt as though I needed a degree just to decipher the first word.

What kind of writing system demands a skill check just to read?!

If fluent literacy and equal skill in writing were prerequisite to nobility, I was fine spending my whole life as a commoner. This was going to split my brain in two.

“Uhh,” I mumbled, “Does this part refer to...wait, what?”

“Hmm... I have no idea what this figure of speech means. If I had to guess from context, I think it goes here?”

“No, hold on, Mika. If you shift that there, then the subject of this other sentence doesn't make any sense.”

“Oh, shoot, you're right. But in that case, we can take the part that precedes this section and...”

Mika and I bumped our heads together and tried all sorts of combinations to decode this secret cipher. By the time I realized it, the awkwardness I'd felt had given way to our usual sense of distance. *I knew it*, I thought. The time we'd spent as friends would not bend so easily.

After over an hour of churning our brains at full throttle, we'd managed to convert the wordy lines into something two kids from the boonies could comprehend. We'd only gotten through the first page, but were rewarded with nothing but a boring seasonal greeting, introduction, and a recounting of the events we'd lived through. *Oh, come on! How many more pages are there?!*

“Huh?”

“Oh? What's this?”

Totally drained, we dejectedly turned to the next page and were greeted by standard Rhinian text. The simple message didn't even bother with the palatial dialect, opting to trim all the needless fat, including an introduction, seeing as Sir Feige and I were already acquainted.

What followed were concerns about our health, reassurances that he would foot the bill, and an apology for not coming to visit on account of the need to travel to the local capital and report the incident to the lord in person.

At the very end, he had written this: “Hand the first page penned

in court process to your masters as proof of your heroic deeds. I know it can be hard to understand, so I've included a version in common Rhinian for you and your friend to read. Make sure to remove that page before you deliver the message."

Mika and I looked at each other. We looked back at the papers. We looked at each other again. After a few seconds, our eyes turned up to the ceiling and we shouted in unison.

"You should've put this one in front!"

[Tips] Court process palatial Rhinian employs the most convoluted grammatical and linguistic devices out of all the palatial subdialects. Unique to the Trialist Empire, it is more a literary phenomenon than a verbal one, and is most often used for imperial correspondence and archiving.

Some linguistic anthropologists speculate that the mounting complexity of palatial language traces its origins to antiespionage tactics in the early Empire. An inexperienced speaker is prone to letting unfitting turns of phrase slip, making it easy to spot an outsider in high society. Even the most carefully camouflaged agents cannot learn the rules of etiquette in a day.

It took a good while cussing out court process writing for me and Mika to let off enough steam to calm down. I genuinely doubted whether a single person in the entire Empire stood to benefit from the existence of the craft; if imperial nobility had to jump through this many hoops just to send a letter, then maybe their titles were more punishment than privilege.

At any rate, we started sifting the palatial letters from the legible ones, and two small envelopes appeared from between the sheets. They'd been slotted into the larger one like a pair of matryoshkas.

"To the young and valiant swordsman?" I read aloud.

"This one says, 'To the bright aspiring magus,'" Mika said.

Hesitantly, we each took the one that best fit us—if I may interject, I'd been driven by sheer fear of death and valor was the last thing on my mind—and opened the seals. I pulled out the contents: a single strip of paper with some sort of stamp on it.

"The heck is this?" I asked.

I knew from its make that this couldn't be a mere note or message. Sheepskin this thick was costly to produce, and it was only used for important documents that needed to stand up to long-term preservation.

"I think it's a bill," Mika said slowly. "I've seen papers like this running errands for my professors. Oh, and it says here that it's issued by the merchants' artisan union, so we won't have to worry about

being cheated.”

Ah, so it's basically a check. Services for money-holders to entrust with liquid assets meant for a third party were about as old as capital itself. This slip of paper represented securities meant to be paid out, clarifying why the material used to create it was of such commendable quality. The recipients—i.e. us—simply needed to take this to the merchants' union to trade it in for usable currency. Afterward, the union would handle the labor of collecting their dues from Sir Feige, either by visiting him in person or subtracting the amount in question from a balance of banked funds.

Imperial cash was almost always metal, making it a colossal pain to use in large-scale transactions. Coins were heavy, bulky, and became difficult to prove as one's own the minute they were stolen. Real tender was reserved for personal use; papers representing tens of thousands of gold coins were indispensable in an age without guarantee of safety in transit. Even the Trialist Empire and all its zealous patrolmen couldn't stamp out robbery on the roads, so the invention of checks was a no-brainer.

Basically, Sir Feige was giving us an allowance. *What a splendid guy. The rich really are leagues above us.*

“Let's see, how much—” *Huh?* I saw a peculiar word on the paper. “Hey, old chum?”

“Give me a second, old pal. I'm busy wondering whether I should go ask the healer for eye drops.”

What a coincidence. I guess good friends are always on the same page.

Jokes aside, I seriously thought that the written value had to be a mistake. The text did not say assarii, nor did it say librae. No, if I wasn't mistaken, this check paid out in drachmae.

Drachmae—gold coins! Drachmae were supreme among our nation's currencies, and unlike the festival stall where I'd been duped in my childhood, this didn't play with any “ten *gold coins*” shenanigans; no, the check unambiguously specified *ten drachmae*.

Yet the sum brought no excitement—only dread.

Take a moment to think about this: my family had been relatively well-off, and this was worth *two full years* of our income. This would be like handing an average white-collar worker forty to eighty thousand dollars.

I wasn't going to complain about getting a bigger allowance, but anyone would freak out if they found a stack of bills sticking out of their New Year's money. I knew old men were prone to spoiling children, but this was a bit much. I doubted I'd ever see a payday like this again, including in my future escapades as a professional adventurer. What, was I supposed to go slay a drake—no, a bona fide dragon—to make up the difference?

“Th-This is—this isn’t a dream, is it? I can buy—oh, I can buy a new notebook—no, a robe... I can send money back home too, and I can pay back my student loans, and, and—”

Being a poor student herself, the staggering number had slapped Mika upside the head she was cradling in a desperate attempt to contain her restlessness. Her head was cocked at a worrying angle, her neck twisting in time with the tangled strands of thought bouncing around her head.

“C-C-C-Calm down, Mika. L-Let’s, uh, let’s cool off and, er—we need to calm down and go ask for the correct numbers.” My effort to restore our composure was laughably rife with stutters, and the hand with the parchment in it went numb.

“M-Me? No, *you* calm down, Erich. Look, l-look! No one with h-handwriting this pretty would make, um, a mistake like that...right? Right?! I’m not crazy for getting excited, am I?!”

Mika’s panic was just as bad, and she desperately clung to me to confirm over my shoulder that we hadn’t misread anything. Had this been a comic book, our watery eyes would have surely been drawn as spinning whirlpools of disarray.

Call us pathetic if you will, but the two of us were working-class kids through and through. I was a servant that scraped by on pennies every day, and she was the sort of student to *treat* herself to a bath. How were we ever meant to keep our cool when the equivalent of tens of thousands of dollars had fallen into our laps? The last time I’d seen a gold coin in the flesh had been that festival incident all those years ago, and the drachma Lady Agrippina had promised me for coming to Wustrow was meant to be broken up into living expenses and savings. But now I had *ten* of them?

My supposedly healed head began to spin. Who in their right mind would give this to someone that had just woken up from a six-day slumber? As happy as I was, disorientation won out; I couldn’t process my emotions quickly enough to keep up.

“Nope,” I said, “let’s go to sleep.”

“...Yeah, let’s take a nap.”

Mika and I decided to escape from cognizant reality before our brains overheated and killed us. I needed to be in a better headspace for this to sink in—the letters and all. Once I did, I’d stash one drachma for the future and pour everything else into Elisa’s tuition. Totally drained, both of us crawled into the bed we were sitting on and clocked out. Later, I would wake up and read through the letters on my own, only to nearly faint again.

Sir Feige had decided not to hand over the tome in question to my client. No, that would have been too easy. He’d decided to give the rights to the cursed book to *me*.

[Tips] The wealth disparity in these times is incomparably massive relative to that of modern Earth. Each of Feige's transcriptions costs tens if not hundreds of drachmae; Agrippina's yearly expenditure on leisure reading easily enters the triple digits; Leizniz has already squandered two hundred to clothe the siblings from Konigstuhl.

"Ah, it is good to see you well, my young swordsman."

The iatrurge had given me permission to get up for some light exercise by the time Sir Feige came to visit us, and he'd brought a gift wrapped in cloth and the early cold of a northern winter. Three days prior he'd sent us forewarning of his arrival as aristocrats are wont to do; the theatrics of slipping a dried, magical leaf in through a closed window to herald his arrival was a clear vestige of his time winning bread in the harsh markets of the imperial capital.

"What an honor it is to have you, Sir Feige," I said, kneeling down and bowing my head. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance once more, and offer my sincerest thanks for your magnanimous hospitality."

We commoners had an ordained process for welcoming a visit from a member of the upper crust. Mika and I had both lived in the capital long enough to know that these rules were absolute, even if we knew the noble in question was laid-back enough to forgive casual conversation. Until he went through the hoops of explicitly allowing us to ease up, we had to stay sharp.

"Now, now, no need to be so formal." With a benevolent wave of his hand, the treant beckoned us to rise. "Honorifics are little more than ornaments in this region anyhow. More importantly, would you introduce me to this charming mage by your side?"

Surprisingly enough, Sir Feige was dressed to the nines. His dark navy doublet and leggings went well with his barky skin and the silvery accent of his foliage. While the design was careful to emphasize the man's casual demeanor, it retained the traditional elements of attire Rhinian aristocrats so highly prized—fashionistas notwithstanding. In fact, his family crest was even sewn onto his overcoat, making his attire fit for a meeting with fellow nobles.

This was clearly overkill for a visit with two lowborn children, making the weight of his respect all the heavier on my shoulders. I could barely keep myself from shrinking away.

"This is my dear friend," I said. "She's the mage I spoke of when I first reported to you."

"It is an honor to meet you, Sir Feige," Mika followed. "I am Mika, a student of the Imperial College of Magic, School of First Light. I offer

you my deepest gratitudes for your considerate care in nursing my dear friend and me to good health. I swear to one day repay this debt to you.”

“Please,” Sir Feige said, “don’t be so stiff, my little heroes. I too was once a lay sapling, and am no more than a single branch of an old tree. Come, let’s sit. I’ve brought you pastries from a baker in the city.”

At his invitation, I led him to the tea table and pulled out a chair. Whether lady or gentleman, the person of lower standing was always expected to do so for those above them.

The furniture belonged to the doctor, who’d readied everything upon receiving word of Sir Feige’s arrival. Grand enough to suit a magus’s tastes, it was horribly out of place next to the sickbeds; still, it paired well with the treant’s dignified appearance. As I showed the gentleman to his seat, Mika brought over the teapot she’d prepared in advance. In another display of wealth, we’d been given a set of ivory-white porcelain to entertain our guest. Lady Agrippina’s china was more than a few cuts above this, but even so, the teaware was well out of our price range.

I’d found it curious that a magus skilled enough to master iatruagy would live out on the brink of nowhere, but I felt like I knew why now. The hospital itself was stately yet simple, and it was evident that Sir Feige appreciated the doctor’s choices in decor. Much like the master scrivener, the doctor must have grown sick of Berylin and washed up here.

After taking our seats, we partook in a relaxing tea break. Mika had brewed the red tea perfectly, and it seemed Sir Feige was fond of whatever root she’d used. With how dry the early months of winter get, the old treant was perennially keen to rehydrate.

We unpackaged the pastries he’d brought us, and these were equally delectable. Not too sweet, the snacks drew out the tea’s aromatic flavor with a delicate touch of molasses and just enough chew to satisfy the jaw.

Our conversation went from introductions to personal history to old memories—all fun topics to share. Alas, the peaceful atmosphere lasted only until we finished talking about the joys and struggles of working in Berylin.

“I see,” Sir Feige said. “With all that experience, it’s hardly any wonder how you two managed such an impressive feat. Indeed, you’re more than worthy of my trust with this.”

Satisfied with our qualifications, he reached into his inner pocket and produced a wooden box. It was clearly too large to fit in his doublet: more specifically, it was just big enough to perfectly enclose that infernal tome he’d shown me in his office.

“Urp,” I grunted, the memories flooding back to my mind.

“What in the world?” Mika’s eyes went wide as she stared at the intricate patterns of sealing text etched into the wood.

These engravings were no mere embellishments; rather, the chaotic array of intersecting lines was the furthest thing from the aesthetic symmetry that dominated imperial taste. Too misshapen to be magic and too blasphemous to be the work of gods, the repulsive design could only be a lock meant to contain something even more hideous. Only from a distance could I see that the lawless strokes actually arranged into a congeries of bubbles.

“I present to you the reward for your labors: the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites*.”

“Thank—” I swallowed back the lump in my throat as I took the box. “Thank you very much.”

The corrupted tome’s presence was overwhelming, despite its seal. I didn’t have any difficulty imagining what horrors would await me if I tried to hold it with my bare hands.

“The book has been fastened with four layers of divine protection, eight layers of magic, and a physical lock. Fear not, little one. That case will not open by mere accident; you can leave it unattended in an unused drawer until the end of the universe, if you so choose.”

Frankly, I was beginning to get the feeling that doing so would be for the best: I wanted to bury the thing so deep underground that no one would ever be able to reach it again. I hadn’t thought about it much when receiving my orders, but what the hell did the madam want this paper brick of pure evil for? I’d known she was a voracious and indiscriminate reader from the lists of texts she had me fetch from her bookshelves and the College library, but I couldn’t fathom why she’d want to read *this*.

“I pray that your master will make use of their good sense when dealing with this,” Sir Feige said. “For safe measure, I suggest you carry the case and key separately.”

“...We shall heed your prudent advice. Mika, will you hang on to this?”

As I picked up the weighty brass, a sudden thought bubbled up in my mind: *why not push it into the lock?* I knew the key itself was free of any curse, so this had to be the same *appel du vide* that had implored me to read the thing during my first encounter.

Mika swallowed her breath. After looking back and forth between me and the box, she finally mustered up enough courage to stick out her hand with a nod. I dropped the key into her palm, and her trembling fingers squeezed tight on the metal. She quickly stashed it in her inner pocket to dispel the lingering gloom.

For my part, I picked up the box and thrust it deep into the

knapsack laying by my bed. I dug out everything I'd packed, including the extra clothes I had yet to touch, just to bury the tome at the very bottom. I swore not to let my hand wander in until I was all the way home.

"Hrm," Sir Feige groaned. "I'm sorry to have soured our pleasant chat. Unfortunately, I couldn't just leave this matter unsettled."

"It had to happen eventually," I said. "There's no need for undue consideration, sir."

With the manifestation of villainy out of sight, my woozy mind finally regained its edge. Now that I knew how unbearable it could be when locked up, I was even more grateful that I'd been spared the fate of hauling it around raw.

"But what was that thing?" Mika asked, clutching the key in her pocket. "What is a forgotten god?"

Although she spoke more to herself than to Sir Feige, I had been too scared to do even that when I'd first seen the tome.

The old treant grunted and stroked his chin. The white leaves of his beard were like morning fog made solid, and his twinkling scarab eyes shone through the haze; he was trying to assess how much he could tell us.

"Divine strength comes from faith," he began. "The gods' might is born from the love of lesser life-forms. However, there is no guarantee that their power will tread a righteous path."

"Do you mean the difference between good and evil gods?" I asked.

"No, little one, those are mere rifts in doctrine or personal values. How should I put this? Goodwill is not always welcome in our world, you see. For example..."

Sir Feige began to speak of an ancient deity in a land far to our east. It no longer had any followers, but in its heyday had spread its name with the dogma that "death is freedom." The god had declared this ephemeral realm to be devoid of respite; the suffering of mortals was so prevalent because that was all their world contained. I could see the argument. Maitreya, the future Buddha that had brought me to this world—at least, as far as I could gather—and his predecessor Gautama had come to the same conclusion in the *Heart Sutra*.

The principle that knowledge of the suffering that fleeting reality entailed was prerequisite to understanding the weight of emancipation from it grasped at the fundamental roots of Buddhism; yet for whatever reason, the god Sir Feige spoke of had decided to declare suicide and homicide the highest forms of charity, teaching its followers that killing was the purest goodwill.

Neighboring pantheons denounced the blasphemous deity and eliminated it and its faithful alike. Nowadays, it was just another

villain in the long annals of history, with but a handful of scriptures to its name.

“Countless atrocities arise from good intentions,” Sir Feige said. “Even in the Empire, we have lords who implement disastrous reforms, cantons that crumble due to misplaced kindness, and towns that go up in flames when well-meaning actions go south... The list goes on.”

Similarly, he explained that while many a god had been brought to heel on account of the consequences of their misguided altruism, none had ever lost their names.

“Whether their intentions be good or ill, gods are only forgotten when their existence itself is considered a scourge on this planet. To be, to be known, and to be spoken of are their greatest sins; they are so supremely heretical that the heavens let mere mortals engage in the insolence of god-slaying. You’d be better off not thinking about them too deeply.”

“Just *knowing* about them can bring us harm?”

“That’s right. Some forgotten gods will curse your soul forever if you so much as utter their name, and others will begin their schemes as soon as your mind acknowledges them. Thus, we bury them along with their monikers, forever entombed in a land without remembrance. The manuscript I worked off of was a copy of a copy of the original, each filtered through the barriers of language, and I still could have been in danger had I not been a treant.”

Holy crap. The tome was a nested translation four generations deep, and it still gave off concentrated ill omen. Sir Feige had to be truly outstanding to have powered through his work in conditions like that.

“Hrm... I’ve spoiled the mood again with my tiresome chatter. Come now, let’s move on to something else.” The treant downed his remaining tea and cut through the heavy silence with a loud clap, putting on his biggest smile. In place of forgotten gods, he asked us to tell him a tale: “What exactly went on in the ichor maze?”

Of course, I’d given him a general rundown of the events upon returning to Wustrow, but I’d skipped most of the details in order to speed along the process of finding an iatrurge. What he was asking for now was a proper retelling.

I glanced at Mika. She was staring at me as if to ask for permission to speak...so I caved and nodded. Refusing an aristocrat’s request was a difficult proposition, and we didn’t really have anything to hide.

Now, I know this isn’t something to state with such certainty, but I verifiably lack literary talent. I studied palatial writing under Lady Agrippina as part of my duties, and her great acclaim of my skills had come in the form of doubting whether I’d ever be able to break into

high society.

The incomprehensible practice of littering letters with poetry—okay, *maybe* I could come to terms with the letters, but I refused to acknowledge their need in official records—had quickly exposed my wanting abilities. Honestly, I couldn't bring myself to waste my experience points on such things, so I'd readily accepted that I simply wasn't suited to storytelling.

Naturally, I'd need to bite the bullet if I wanted to become a diplomat or magus, but as an adventurer-hopeful I had no need for linguistic mastery.

However, the same could not be said of Mika: she'd landed at the College gates with the lofty dream of bettering her homeland as a full-fledged magus, and had diligently studied all the accessory fields on the road to professorship. When we tossed lyrical lines back and forth, mine were always quotes from sagas that had stuck with me; in contrast, she was creative enough to sometimes ad-lib new material.

So listening to her passionately depict our adventure with more fervor than any minstrel left me staring blankly into the distance, thinking, *Wowee, this Erich fellow sure is something*. It was just that, well, her narration was so laden with splendiferous rhetoric that I couldn't help but wonder what alien species she'd seen to come up with such magnificence.

Hearing her say my "twinkling eyes put the glimmering veil of the night sky to shame," or that my "sweet golden locks were the envy of the Harvest Goddess Herself," didn't even give me time to blush; I skipped straight to tapping her shoulder to calm her down.

By far the worst aspect of her oration was that it managed to light a fire in Sir Feige's soul. He'd whipped out a notepad and had begun writing down everything.

I was intensely curious about his handwriting now that I could see it in person: although the inky letters only gave off a faint trace of mana, whatever spells or cantrips he used were efficiency epitomized when it came to turning a mad scribble into a perfectly typeset font. Alas, I couldn't focus on his technique with Mika going on about this strange hero, whom I found equal parts familiar and exotic.

Every now and again, I interrupted her romanticized account to clarify that my intentions hadn't been so grand, but each time, she simply stated, "Don't be so humble," and went on without skipping a beat. Sir Feige and his note-taking were much the same.

"Incredible," the treant said. "What a fine story. I'd wished to have this tale packaged into a proper song when the little swordsman first told it to me, but that desire now burns stronger than ever. Would you two mind if I asked a friend of mine to put your exploits to meter?"

“W-Wait!” I shouted. “Please, reconsi—”

“Really?!” Mika exclaimed. “Are you listening, Erich?! We’re going to have a poem! We’ll be part of a real saga!”

My friend grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me with more zeal and vigor than I’d ever seen her display. Her cheeks were rosy from excitement and she panted with every breath; had the circumstances been any different, I would have mistaken her for a cat in heat.

“Stop!” I pleaded. “Calm down, Mika! I’m not as cool as you make me out to be! No one wants to hear about a pair of heroes dragging themselves home with blood, sweat, and indescribables dribbling from every pore!”

“Don’t be stupid, old pal!” Mika retorted. “That’s exactly what makes our story good!”

“That’s right, little one,” Sir Feige chimed in. “I may love the heroic epics wherein a conundrum knottier than a seaman’s hitch is cleared with the faint flick of a sword, but those that end with the protagonist exhausting all their strength to rip victory from the jaws of defeat are just as splendid. Fret not about the money; I’ll be sure to give you your share.”

“No, that’s not what I meant!”

Please, old chum, have mercy. Not only had Mika heavily dramatized our feats, but she was also apparently wearing a thick pair of rose-tinted glasses when looking at me.

Ours had not been such an impressive victory. We’d been on the brink of defeat, and awoke covered in dust, mud, and the blood seeping from our countless wounds. We’d summoned up the dregs of our mana, shamelessly clinging to any and every means to extend our fleeting lives. If nothing else, the tale was unfit to be immortalized by a poet that spoke to Sir Feige’s tastes for rhapsodic heroism.

It easily took me over two hours to curb the nobleman’s mischief and straighten out the loose screws in my friend’s brain. While I wouldn’t deny that this made for a great change of pace after losing my sanity to the damned tome, I didn’t appreciate the mental fatigue that came with this public humiliation.

In the end, I managed to convince Sir Feige not to publish the saga, but he remained adamant on having it written for personal use. He said he knew of the perfect poet, one whom he regularly patronized, but I really, *really* did not appreciate it.

He also said he’d send us each a copy whenever the saga was completed, but I knew by this point that I’d seal it away somewhere without so much as opening the cover. This wasn’t just for my soundness of mind: can you imagine what would happen if *Lady Agrippina* were to see it? Just thinking about it made me shudder.

As the tea party came to a close, I was left wondering whether the accursed book or my company had caused me more grief for the day.

[Tips] Divine seals are a form of containment that rely on heavenly miracles to produce. Though they come with several restrictions, once met, the seals rob their mark of power and weaken its influence on its surroundings.

The cold night nipped at my skin. *I'll need to start stuffing my clothes with cotton*, I thought.

A few days had passed since Sir Feige's appointment. This morning, the iatrurge had given me the all clear for more strenuous activity, so I'd made sure my traveling buddy was asleep and sneaked out after dark.

The hospital was one of the finest buildings in Wustrow, with a large fence enveloping both it and the doctor's residence-slash-office across the yard.

All sorts of herbs grew in the open garden, and there was even a greenhouse in the corner to sustain less cooperative plants. The lot was of respectable size, making it the perfect place to get my body moving.

"All right..."

I held Schutzwolfe's sheath in my left hand and placed my right on her handle. Everything but the blade itself had been tailor-made for me, and the way my fingers sank into the grip was always euphoric—especially now that I had forgone physical activity for so long.

I whipped my arms forward and stretched my hips to unsheathe her in one fell swoop.

Although European blades were not as known as their Japanese counterparts were for striking from a sheathed position, it would be wrong to assume such tactics were impossible. By maneuvering the upper and lower halves in sync instead of relying on one's hands alone, a sword could rapidly be freed from its shackles.

My surging blade sliced through the night air with a whistle. A flurry of sideways strikes followed, and as I warmed up, I twirled Schutzwolfe into a backhanded stance to bring her down from above.

Every limb, every digit, was one. The movement of one muscle rippled through joints to affect all its peers, and congruent harmony created a system more than the sum of its parts.

I kicked off the soil, landing in a way to send the force of impact to my chest. With a turn of my shoulder and a delicate flick of my wrists, I slashed horizontally, vertically, and diagonally, both up and down. Every attack cut through the imaginary shadows of necks,

armpits, and wrists exposed through cracks in armor.

“Urgh...”

Yet my form was far from satisfactory. My breathing fell into disarray within a hundred swings, and my arms and thighs felt heavy. With every strike, the splitting sound of the air grew louder to inform me of my wasted movements. Allowing the edge of my blade to tilt by even the slightest degree increased drag and displaced more and more air. An impeccable attack—one worthy of being dubbed critical—compelled the atmosphere to stay silent. Yet my unsightly movements were a far cry from cutting down the formless air around me.

I had rusted in every way: my flesh, my bones, and most importantly, my senses.

Taking weeks to rest was far too much to allow me to retain my desired level of skill. I hadn’t decayed to the point of frailty, but I knew that if my past self were to appear before me, I wouldn’t last more than five exchanges before losing my head. The question now was how long it would take to regain what I’d lost.

Come to think of it, I’d seen an interesting trait a while back when I’d been pondering my build. Quick Healer shortened the total time needed to make a full recovery, and there were a few others that made it harder to lose muscle memory once attained.

Up until now, I’d been tunneling on jacking up my maximum damage throughput, but maybe it was time to start taking long-term traits and skills that would help me over the course of a campaign. The future Buddha’s blessing allowed me to build myself up like a tabletop character, but did nothing to shape the world into that of a TRPG; I couldn’t expect a full heal to fall into my hands at the end of every session.

Clicked as it is to say, he who has no health has nothing. I couldn’t deny that taking care of my body was one of my most important tasks as an adventurer. In fact, killing this much time whenever I got injured was sure to cut into my ability to do what I needed to do.

“Ugh, augh... Blegh... Ahh...”

As soon as I eased up, the terrible cramps in my wrists, knees, and all the other joints I had abused wielding a sword set in. I panted more than ever before, and my whole mouth tasted like iron.

I was embarrassingly sluggish. I’d need to draft up a proper schedule to get myself back on track. I pulled over my waterskin with an Unseen Hand and took a long gulp. With a sad sigh, I returned Schutzwolfe to her sheath; I was definitely going to be sore in the morning. Still, I had more to do: I hadn’t chosen to come out at nighttime on a whim. With the doctor’s approval out of the way, I could have easily done this when the sun was up. Mika wasn’t the

overprotective type, anyway.

But I couldn't exactly test *this* in broad daylight.

"Come."

I imbued my voice with will and a sword instantly appeared in my outstretched hand. Reality neither warped nor tore; the sword simply materialized between my fingers like it had always been there.

Howling cheers assaulted my mind. The unpalatable brainquakes were packed with its ecstasy at the thought of being swung. I'd figured that it was best to test the sword, seeing how I couldn't rid myself of it and all. But I wasn't just testing how it measured up as a weapon; I needed to see how much of a threat it posed.

Darker than the lightless night, its blade gleamed under the moon. Near the hilt, the engravings blinked on and off with a haunting glow. Although it was monstrously large in my childlike hands, it wasn't too heavy to wield. Despite its age, the handle was absolutely perfect—irritatingly, even more so than Schutzwolfe's, which had been specifically made for me. The center of mass was perfectly placed. I wouldn't grow tired using this sword for hours at a time, yet it still allocated enough weight near the tip that the sharpest part of its edge had significant heft.

I swung it around a few times and could tell that my base mastery in Hybrid Sword Arts without any two-handed-weapon add-ons was enough to create a devastating attack. Even with my tattered arms, I could command it with enough force to split the cold night with no more than a faint whistle.

The sword was magnificent...but oddly enough, that was it.

This was undeniably a mystic blade, and not of the Excalibur or Durandal varieties. No hero would carry an arm of this make; it was the sort of weapon you'd find in the hands of a cursed prince or stumble upon in the family feuds of the *Poetic Edda*.

Yet holding it now, I felt nothing. It was simply an impeccable sword, and while I found its mind-grating screams tiresome, there was nothing more to it.

It did not urge me to harvest blood and souls for my dark lord, nor did it magically improve my swordsmanship. I didn't have any problems letting go after taking it into hand either.

"I can't believe it's actually safe..."

I was not a blithering enough idiot to pick up an obviously evil nightmare without any thought. I'd made sure to consult Ursula beforehand, since she seemed to understand the thing to some degree. When I'd asked her about the dangers, she'd replied that the sword would be content if I loved it as a sword, and swore that its only quirk was its chatty nature.

I'd remained skeptical. Can you blame me? Sure, it looked cool,

but its aesthetic appeal was not that of a shining white knight; it paired better with an unholy villain in full black armor, trimmed with bloody red to boot. One testimony from a friendly alf wasn't quite enough to assure me.

After finishing my trial run, I wiped the sweat from my brow and stuck the Craving Blade in the ground, only to be met with pleading. It felt like a dog begging to turn off the path home in order to extend its walk. But when I placed my hand on the pommel and expressed my exhaustion, it sent me one last disappointed thought before giving way to silence.

...Huh. I guess it's willing to listen to me.

Quenching my thirst, I looked up at the moon. I would have to think about my relationship with this thing on my way home. Naturally, I planned to reserve judgment until I could ask the madam for her opinion in Berylin...but even so, the Craving Blade was my reward for this little adventure.

[Tips] Cursed mystic blades are more than tall tales—they exist, and the College keeps several corrupted specimens locked away in the depths of its great library.

Having been born in the temperate lands of South Rhine, the swift and frigid approach of the northern winter was merciless beyond belief.

"It's already snowing..."

When Mika and I had finished our preparations to return to Berylin, we looked much bulkier from all the stuffing in our clothes. We had busted out the winter gear we'd packed just in case our stay in Wustrow dragged on, and the extra padding was a token of Sir Feige's compassion. Judging from how fluffy it was, the cotton he'd given us was a high-quality import from the east. Thanks to his present, we managed to avoid spreading what we had on hand too thinly.

"We never even used cotton this nice back home," Mika said.

"What? You guys use cotton in the north?"

I looked over in surprise. The extra layers rounded out her silhouette, heightening her childish cuteness, but her eyes were anything but: she was glaring at me like I was some sort of moron.

"We might be used to putting up with the cold, but we're still humanfolk. The werewolves and selchies still barely wear anything in the wintertime, but regular mensch and tivisco have to bundle up. In fact, I'm pretty sure most of what we earn goes into heating our homes."

"Oh... I didn't know. I've just heard that joke about how 'it'll be a cold year when the northerners put on sleeved shirts' and all."

“That’s an exaggerated stereotype.” It was rare for her to find a joke so unamusing. She puffed her nose and finished packing the last of our souvenirs and foodstuffs onto Castor’s back.

Speaking of which, Castor and Polydeukes were dressed just as nicely as we were. Again, the blankets keeping them warm were a gift from Sir Feige, seeing as the medical treatment had been the cause for our delayed departure.

Horses are truly a hardy lot. Despite originating in warm climates, workhorses held strong in the snowy farmlands of the north. The stalwart creatures could push through snow even when the temperature was below freezing, and those not born in polar regions could grow accustomed to the cold over time.

However, while they remained lively on days where we mensch would freeze, the cold impacted their caloric efficiency. Their resistance to the elements apparently stemmed from the heat they produced in their intestines while digesting—I’d been blindsided by the awfully modern science behind this knowledge—so they required more and more food as the temperature dropped.

Thus, Sir Feige had granted the Dioscuri these quilts, so that we wouldn’t be totally hopeless on the off chance we failed to find an inn.

The “little adventure” he’d sent us on may have turned out to be an unliving nightmare, but I almost felt guilty for how well he’d accommodated us. I made a mental note to write a proper thank-you letter as soon as I returned home.

“All right,” I said. “We’ve made a lot of memories here, but I think it’s time to go.”

“Yup,” Mika said. “The clouds look like light, powdery snow, but who knows what’ll happen tomorrow? I doubt the roads will get blocked off, but we’d better hurry back south.”

Spoken like a true northerner. Mika felt something that I didn’t as she stared up at the gray skies. Maybe those eyes were looking somewhere else—somewhere far north of Wustrow.

I, too, wanted to visit her homeland one day. Living at the Imperial College made it difficult to leave the capital. Without trains or cars, long-distance travel took heaps of money and time. She would likely never get a chance to return home until she achieved the grand ambitions that had led her to Berylin to begin with.

My situation was not far from hers...but I had Elisa. I couldn’t imagine how difficult it must have been to leave home at such a young age to live in a faraway land with foreign etiquette and foreign foods, all without a single person by her side.

“...You don’t have to worry about me, Erich.”

“Huh?”

“How long do you think we’ve been together? I can guess what

you're thinking from the look on your face."

Mika put her foot on Castor's stirrup and nimbly leapt on; the clumsiness she'd shown months ago was nowhere to be found. She pulled down her scarf and flashed me a sunny smile.

"I miss my hometown a lot—so much that I want to head there this very instant." She offered me her hand and continued, "But I'll be fine. I have a friend now, don't I?"

"...Yeah. You're right. Let's go home, old chum."

"Let's, old pal."

I voiced my concerns that riding double from the outset might tire out Castor, but Mika's hand remained outstretched. Unable to outlast her enthusiasm, I took it and climbed on behind her.

"I'll lead for once. I can't cling to your back forever, can I?"

Mika's smile was beaming with pride, so I silently put my hands around her waist. The sensation in my hands was different from the countless rides we'd shared in the past: softer and rounder, her body was markedly more feminine. Yet even so, my heart was almost comically calm.

Mika is here. My friend may look different on the outside, but nothing has changed at all. That thought alone was a comfort like no other.

Our steed's hooves advanced down the road with the characteristic clapping of horseback travel. Once the layered drone of footsteps began, it refused to cease; more and more, the scenery behind us disappeared with every passing second.

In that moment, I had an epiphany: *this must be the meaning of adventure.*

And with this realization came another: no matter how ordinary my life in the capital had become, the dream branded onto my soul would never fade. Surely I would set out, time and time again, to see this scenery just one more time. I would chase this indescribable melancholy and fulfillment that awaited after a job well done.

"Hey, Mika?"

"What's up, old pal?"

"I know this was a rough trip...but will you come with me again?"

She didn't turn back, but pretended to think with a loud "Hrm" to tease me.

Don't be so mean. I tightened my hold around her waist and put my chin on her shoulder, causing her to let out a ticklish laugh.



“Fine, fine. I’ll stay by your side for as long as you want. But put a few years between the crazy trips like these, okay?”

Sorry, old chum. I don’t think I can promise that.

I knew my luck: I was absolutely certain that another bad streak of dice rolls would land me in another disaster at some point. The best I could do for her was pray that our path home would be free of ancient dragons.

[Tips] The Empire is so large that its northernmost point and southernmost point share similar climates.

Early Winter of the Thirteenth Year

Cleanup

The time following the climax wherein players manage all the clerical tasks that follow battle. PCs tend to their wounds, and severely damaged characters roll to see if their injuries prove fatal.

Some GMs give this phase its own scene, while others simply take the results and move along to the conclusion.

For some time, a single thought had dominated Agrippina du Stahl's mind: *He's late. He's clearly much too late.*

Finally, though, her patience was rewarded: the amusing boy she'd picked up had come home with a tale delightful enough to exceed her wildest dreams. She'd sent him off on a whim back in the months of autumn, and had made it a point not to spoil the experience with far-sight or a familiar. But for the boy to embroil himself in a once-in-a-lifetime donnybrook...well, suffice it to say that his offerings were more than enough for her to excuse his tardiness with a smile.

Indeed, the first heiress to the Stahl Barony looked at her weary manservant on the brink of collapse and *smiled*.

"This is no laughing matter," Erich said.

"And what do you suggest I do if not laugh?"

Agrippina had covered her lips as was proper for any self-respecting genteel lady, but the wide, showy sneer was not something a single hand could conceal. It took no magic on her part to radiate waves of dark energy—an all-too-fitting expression, by the boy's private estimation.

The master of the house nonchalantly lay on her couch, and her indentured servant sat on the chair across from her with the babbling waterworks factory he called a sister dangling from his neck. Without context, the scene was confusion incarnate; with it, it wasn't much better. The boy had raced ahead of the encroaching winter on his trip south; this chaotic reception drew a long sigh out of him.

He didn't particularly mind his sister. Abandoning a child so attached to him for over a month only to come home with terrible wounds—albeit fully healed—was sure to provoke this sort of response. Rather, he was proud of how much she'd grown: her feet remained firmly planted on the ground as she snuggled up against him.

Erich's distaste stemmed solely from the rotten heart of the mastermind pulling all the strings. It was midday, but Agrippina lacked the decency to change out of her nightwear or so much as sit upright. As she read the letter he'd brought and listened to his story, she took her time digesting the circumstances in utter bliss, breaking out into the laughter of a bemused theatergoer.

Having lived through all this agony, however, Erich was left in awe at how sweet an expression she dared to make in the face of his ordeal.

Methuselah, as a whole, were a hedonistic people. They sought pleasures to dim the existential suffering of eternity at best, and concocted diabolical schemes to create them at worst. To them, this was just the way of things; unending life was simply that taxing on the soul.

Among methuselah, there were some high-minded individuals who led chaste lives in their youths, but such commitment to morality could not last. Cracks formed within a century, the abrasion grew harsher after two, and after three hundred years any fixation on virtue totally crumbled. The grindstone of time was too rough for the spongy psyche to bear.

Even the most striking stimulation dulled into habit after overuse, plunging into the terrible realm of the ordinary. Like the forgotten passions of a couple fallen out of love, aging methuselah began to tire of existence.

One could hardly blame them. Lesser creatures rushed through life too quickly for them: yesterday's newborn was today's adult, fated to die by the day after tomorrow. Surrounded by an ever-changing gallery of faces, they waded through a nightmare world gilded by the illusion of progress despite its inherent stagnation. The only constant was their fellow immortals. To ask such sorry beings to live lives bound by integrity was too much. They guarded their fragile selves with shells of debauchery.

Of course, as with anything, pleasure was finite. Still, the methuselah had long since decided that to seek it was a much, *much* more palatable alternative to a permanent malaise, gradually turning the sufferer into a shiftless sack of flesh.

They knew the fates of those who had come before. When sentience awoke to see first light, primordial methuselah had searched for comfort and prosperity in a world devoid of diversions. Now, those same individuals walked the land on little more than inertia, reduced to living displays of the horror that came with loss of purpose.

So the methuselah turned to hedonism—to the rejection of past and future for the joy of the present. Legends of methuselah of yore causing mayhem on a global scale for the sake of momentary relief

had not arisen from thin air. Agrippina had inherited the sickness of her ancestors, which she enjoyed to the fullest extent.

Agrippina's favorite pastime could be boiled down to an addiction to stories. She had always been a lover of books: narratives staved off encroaching boredom, and the injection of new ideas served to hone her mind to even greater degrees of precision. Spending her time steeped in meaning helped her fight nihilism's event horizon.

Yet one day, epiphany struck: the lives of men were but performances on a stage. Among the many books Agrippina read were memoirs, recollections, and biographies—including some that had met the terrible fate of censure—of people who had taken the world by storm. Lives preserved in a solution of text and pickled in bound paper offered her soul a layer of intrigue that originated beyond her earthly vessel. Emotions that had withered away in her own heart could be resurrected by using someone else as a conduit.

If so, the crooked methuselah realized, then to watch others flounder through their lives was sure to be the highest form of entertainment. During her stint in the College library and her roadside trek to nowhere in particular, dealing with other people had been too much of a hassle for the hermit to bite the bullet. But *now* the affairs of others were more accessible than ever before.

The results of her bet pleased her greatly. Bored, she'd sent Erich along on an errand thinking, *I'm sure I can count on this boy to find some way to amuse me*. While it would be patently false for her to claim disinterest in the details of a god that earthly beings had exiled from public consciousness, the tome only accounted for half the reason she'd made her request.

Lo and behold, Agrippina's every expectation had been surpassed.

Her servant had managed to win the book from an infamously ill-tempered scrivener with an exhilarating tale to boot. Feige had asked Erich to turn his misfortune into a proper saga from the story's first telling; she would have surely done the same had the boy made the mistake of oversharing. Her love of books was unparalleled, after all.

"Ahh," Agrippina sighed. "It has been too long since I've laughed like this... In fact, I've laughed so much that I'm feeling rather parched. Brew me a cup of the usual, would you?"

"...As you wish." Erich swallowed back the bitter criticism he could not voice and rose from his seat.

Knowing well that anything he said would only fuel further amusement, he elected to shut his mouth and do his tasks. He scooped up his sister with one hand to make sure her legs wouldn't drag and disappeared into the kitchen. The downcast cloud that hung over his head was more than a boy his age ought to bear.

"Now then..." Agrippina sipped on her freshly made tea, letting

her favorite flavor wet her dried throat. She pulled up one of the letters she'd been given: the one in which Feige had deferred all ownership of the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites* to Erich.

The box holding the book in question was already on Agrippina's lap. The key had been laid beside it, and in many ways it was only natural for the ultimate goal of this entire mission to end up in the master's hands.

One issue remained outstanding: the initial order had been for Erich to purchase the tome on her behalf, and so far, she had only given him fare for travel. Yet regardless of the circumstances, it was difficult for a servant to break accepted conduct.

"I've no doubt an average cretin in my position would deprive you of this book, citing the original order," Agrippina stated. "But I shan't deny my own servant's labors in the name of avarice."

The personification of wickedness broke character and waved around the paper in an unfathomable moment of honor. But of course, this was by no means for charity's sake.

Agrippina was a magus—a *Daybreak* magus—to her core: her only thought was, *I'm sure this will prove far more exciting*. She was searching for fun, the well-being of others be damned—a scoundrel to the core as well.

"So, I shall give you three choices."

The methuselah raised three fingers, each with an accompanying dot of light hovering above. As her mana flowed into the first, the amorphous blob took the form of letters.

"First, I can offer to nullify three years of Elisa's tuition, room, and board. In essence, I'd be purchasing the compendium for, oh, roughly seventy-five drachmae."

The boy's hand stopped in the middle of patting his crying sister's head.

So easy to read, the scoundrel thought with a sneer. Tipped off by her detestable smile, Erich quickly resumed consoling Elisa. Unfortunately for him, his peasant upbringing had left him weak to large sums of money.

Perhaps I should have him treat himself to something extravagant one of these days. As one strand of her thoughts strayed to dabble in nonconsensual gentrification, the others moved on to reshaping the second ball of light.

"Second, I can raise your standing to that of Elisa's—a proper apprentice. You would be freed from your chores, afforded time for serious study, and given the opportunity to attain some semblance of social stature."

Again, the funds that would obviously be needed to fuel such a thing caused the boy's hands to jitter. Still, he managed to avoid

freezing up this time through sheer force of will.

Such a reaction was not unfounded. To officially enroll a student in the College required mountains of paperwork, not to mention the absurdity of a mere researcher taking on a second concurrent disciple—a *servant*, at that! Getting her way would be an unthinkable demonstration of brute force, and the money and time she would need to spend pulling strings from the shadows easily outstripped the expenses of her first offer.

Worst of all, Lady Leizniz already had eyes on him. If that sickly wraith in the dean's seat caught wind of their plan, she was sure to offer to take him under *her* wing instead. That would be a failure of catastrophic proportions, so any move Agrippina made would need to be done quickly. The time limit was sure to inflate the costs of her ploy to an even more legendary total sum.

Barring a handful of issues, though, this was an attractive proposition. The boy had hitherto only been able to pick up small bits of knowledge in idle moments, and full-time commitment to learning was sure to bring massive gains of power with it. On top of that, the support system cadre membership offered was convenient beyond belief, and the social might that came with a magus's title was difficult to ignore.

“Lastly, I can buy this tome for fifty drachmae.”

The final blob of light snaked into the number fifty. While not as impactful as the two proposals that had preceded it, this was a massive allotment. Fifty drachmae without any strings attached could balloon into far greater riches depending on how it was used.

He could invest it, start a business, or send it home to have his family help earn Elisa's tuition. Erich's memories of bygone days maximizing profits at a trading firm caused something in his mind to stir.

However, the greatest issue was that, unlike the first two options, all the risk lay with him. The details determining whether his fortune would grow or shrink would become his sole responsibility as soon as the money exchanged hands. Those who engaged in trade did so constantly searching to gain more value than they paid for. While the potential return was big, the effort required to attain it made the risk and reward difficult to weigh.

“Anyhow,” Agrippina said casually, “I don't ask that you answer anytime soon. Take your time to brood—even you mensch can make time for that, can't you?”

The young methuselah's sinister smile made her condescending racism feel cute in comparison. Alas, the fleeting mensch could not muster the vigor to say anything in return.

[Tips] Although the nobility enjoy great privileges, there is always a bigger fish. Even peers of equal standing can pose a threat once banded together, so unconventional actions are strictly forbidden to retain the delicate balance of power. To push through with one's ludicrous schemes requires considerable wealth and authority; the names of those who do ring out in high society as the true rulers of the political sphere.

Dear Mother and Father, are you faring well amidst the hustle and bustle of winter preparations? I've just returned from the doctor's, but the knot in my stomach may warrant a second visit.

Jokes aside, I wished that the world would quit introducing more baffling events while I was still reeling from the last.

I had no grudge with Elisa: it was my own fault for making my baby sister worry. Our tight schedule and lack of funds had left me unable to buy her anything nice as a souvenir—the options in Wustrow were frankly lacking, but I digress—so I wasn't going to complain about her clinging to me for the next few days. Carrying her around like a princess wherever I went was the least I could do to make it up to her.

But I had zero clue which of the three rewards from the madam I was to pick.

Subtracting the current year, three years of Elisa's tuition and living expenses would give us two whole solar orbits of headway; in the best case, my sister might even win her independence with that time.

According to Mika, the average magus took around five years to graduate from being a student. However, this was the average for mensch with typical mana levels, and immortal races that matured slowly or those that were simply unaffected by age often took longer. Still, our family's little princess was basically a mensch in physical terms, and I was sure she was a budding genius, so three years seemed like a reasonable estimate.

On top of that, three years without expenses would give me more opportunity to earn extra coin, effectively extending the amount of time I could cover Elisa's tuition. Near the end of that period, I'd be a legal adult, meaning my sources of income would expand to include official work as an adventurer. Not only would I be able to make money more efficiently, but I'd be one step closer to fulfilling my promise to Margit.

That said, the second option was tempting in its own right, especially now that I'd experienced the limits of what a lone blade could do for me. Not to say that sword-based builds as a whole had hit a wall, of course; I mean to say that in my specific case, there were

issues with how I'd paired magic and swordplay.

I maintained that min-maxed martial abilities offered a beautiful path to uncontested power in a vacuum. As a fully specced swordsman, I could cleave through armor like hot butter and dig my razored edge into the most formless of geists and souls, culminating in the apex of skill: a god-felling cut.

However, I'd split my resources into swordplay and magic, and between the two, arcane arts progressed more quickly.

At present, I was confident in saying I would be hard-pressed to lose a one-on-one fight. Hybrid Sword Arts was at VII: Virtuoso, where only Scales VIII and IX lay above; my traits had all been carefully selected to reinforce my strengths.

On the magical end, I had the Independent Processing to simultaneously command a fleet of Unseen Hands, and my mutant homebrew magic let me disable living enemies in a burst of light and sound. If worse came to worst, I had an absolute defense in my space-bending barrier. Looking at my character sheet caused me to marvel at just how much of a royal pain I was to kill.

Yet even with all that *and* an adept debuffer at my side, the two of us had been one step—no, *half* a step—from dying. Further, I was still light-years away from being as unfathomably broken as the lowlife in front of me.

The bottleneck for both of these issues was my lack of radical new ideas and my overreliance on physical attacks. Making a sword go beyond the bounds of physical reality took far too many experience points. Even now, knocking on IX: Divine territory came with a nausea-inducing price tag, and the ability to cut down shapeless concepts lay even beyond that.

Magic offered a slightly cheaper path. Although messing with souls and phenomena and the like remained a feat for true masters, I wouldn't have to ever relive my struggles against the undead. Readyng an arsenal of new options for such foes would be relatively inexpensive in comparison.

I could develop auxiliary equipment that directly added to my firepower, shore up weaknesses with mutative spells to lengthen my reach, or even pivot away from my arcane swordsman build to focus on creating a thaumaturgic I-Win button.

...Of course, this was all predicated on the assumption that the little guy upstairs had what it took to be a researcher at all.

In this genre, so to speak, the classics saw main characters walk into magical academies and show off raw power they didn't quite understand with flash and flourish to win the approval of others. Whether the display happened at an entrance exam or during a quick spar was irrelevant; by blowing away an opponent with ease, they

were instantly transformed into objects of worship and respect, placed at the top of the social—if not systemic—pecking order.

Alas, the Imperial College was an institute of learning, and “Dunno how, but I did a thing!” did not fly. Despite its fantasy facade, this world was curiously modern in its outlook—no doubt thanks to the wanton contributions of my predecessors and the absence of religious hegemony. If I wanted to become a top-tier magus, I would need to distill my own abilities into the realm of theory, capturing the essence of my ideas in essay form for others to scrutinize. I’d thought that the eccentric notes Mika always took seemed like a lot of work, but she had merely been doing the bare minimum to claw her way to the beginning of a magus’s journey.

Studying and writing treatises while preparing to set off on an adventure would need a truly unimaginable amount of time and resources. The nonnegotiable detours I would need to take—at minimum, I’d need to upgrade my palatial speech before I got anywhere near a lectern—did little to solve my overarching problems.

Lady Agrippina had said she would make me her student; she had *not* said anything about *paying* for me.

Honestly, what was wrong with this woman? This whole venture seemed like it would cost several times my theoretical tuition, and she was willing to dish out the former but would leave me to dry on the latter. What kind of meager existence did she want me to live? Was I to be some Classical Chinese peasant, farming scraps of food to eat by day and studying for the civil service exam by night? She’d probably relish in my financial distress with a wine glass in hand, the witch.

“I understand... May I put Elisa to bed?”

“Feel free,” Lady Agrippina said. “Tuck her in before she breaks that neck of yours.”

Whether I was to pay or be paid, I decided to put off my money troubles for another time. Trying to decide on anything when my brain was all mushy was a sure ticket to disaster. Besides, Elisa had cried herself to sleep, and leaving her like this was just as bad for her as it was for my neck.

Fighting the urge to go to bed myself, I laid my sister onto her soft covers and wished her good night.

[Tips] Like many universities on Earth, ranks beyond that of student at the Imperial College are gatekept by the standing professoriat. Some prodigies rise to research positions after two years; others lose all hope when they see children generations younger than them attain professorship. The College is more than a garden for mad scientists: it is a melting pot of people from all across the spectrum of talent.

“Now then,” Lady Agrippina said joyfully. “It’s finally time.”

By the time I returned, she’d brought in a short work desk from gods-know-where and slammed down the treasure box on top—and by treasure, I mean none other than the *Compendium of Forgotten Divine Rites* I’d handed her moments ago.

“Is there any need for me to accompany you as you open it?” I asked.

“What?” she scoffed. “Surely you must be curious to see what your prize for overcoming an extraordinary challenge amounts to.”

Pen and paper had been readied alongside it, perhaps for the madam to jot down notes on what she was to read. Both her hands were enveloped in a lattice of glowing mystic circles—as per usual, her magic was too adroit for me to comprehend—that safeguarded the skin like a pair of gloves. The innumerable strands of light weaving in and out looked like she’d covered her fingers in earthworms. It was—and I am being as generous as I can when I say this—patently vile.

“Madam, I would advise you to consider why the tome was so thoroughly sealed when it passed into my hands in the first place.”

“I’m sure it won’t be an issue so long as we don’t peek in with our bare eyes. Does it truly not pique your interest? I’m shocked that you managed to refrain from opening it before arriving.”

“Madam, I would advise you to consider the full-strength barriers shrouding both your hands. Would you not mock any other magus for their lack of cool had you seen them cast this spell?”

“Oh, please. This is but a safeguard for the book itself. I wouldn’t want to sully such a rare find with the dirt of my fingers, you know?”

A normal barrier would do just fine for that, you bald-faced liar...

Regardless of my true thoughts, a servant such as I could not voice them, nor could I escape the situation after my liege had so kindly readied a seat for me. Perhaps I could have slinked off had she only prepared a chair, but the table had a steaming cup of tea on it that hadn’t been there when I’d left.

“Hm?” I mumbled. A small box had been left beside the teacup. The wool-covered parcel with carefully rounded corners was of considerable quality, but it lacked a logo. The quiet rejection of ostentation packed in this masterwork was proof enough that it had come from a high-end store somewhere in Berylin.

“Take it,” Lady Agrippina said. “Consider it a gift for an engrossing story well told. Put it on, will you?”

“Uh...” I opened the container to find a monocle. It was the same make as the madam’s: just a bit of glass rimmed with metal meant to sit in one’s eye socket.

“Used as it may be, it hasn’t a speck of dust on it. It ought to still

be more than functional.”

“Are you sure? This must have been costly...”

“What more worth will it have than a stone in an alleyway if it sits around unused?”

No matter her logic, I was a regular person who considered silver quarters just as far out of reach as gold coins; I felt like I was dealing with something more than I was due. Also, my eyes didn’t sit very deep on account of my Mother’s Son trait; I was worried it might slip off.

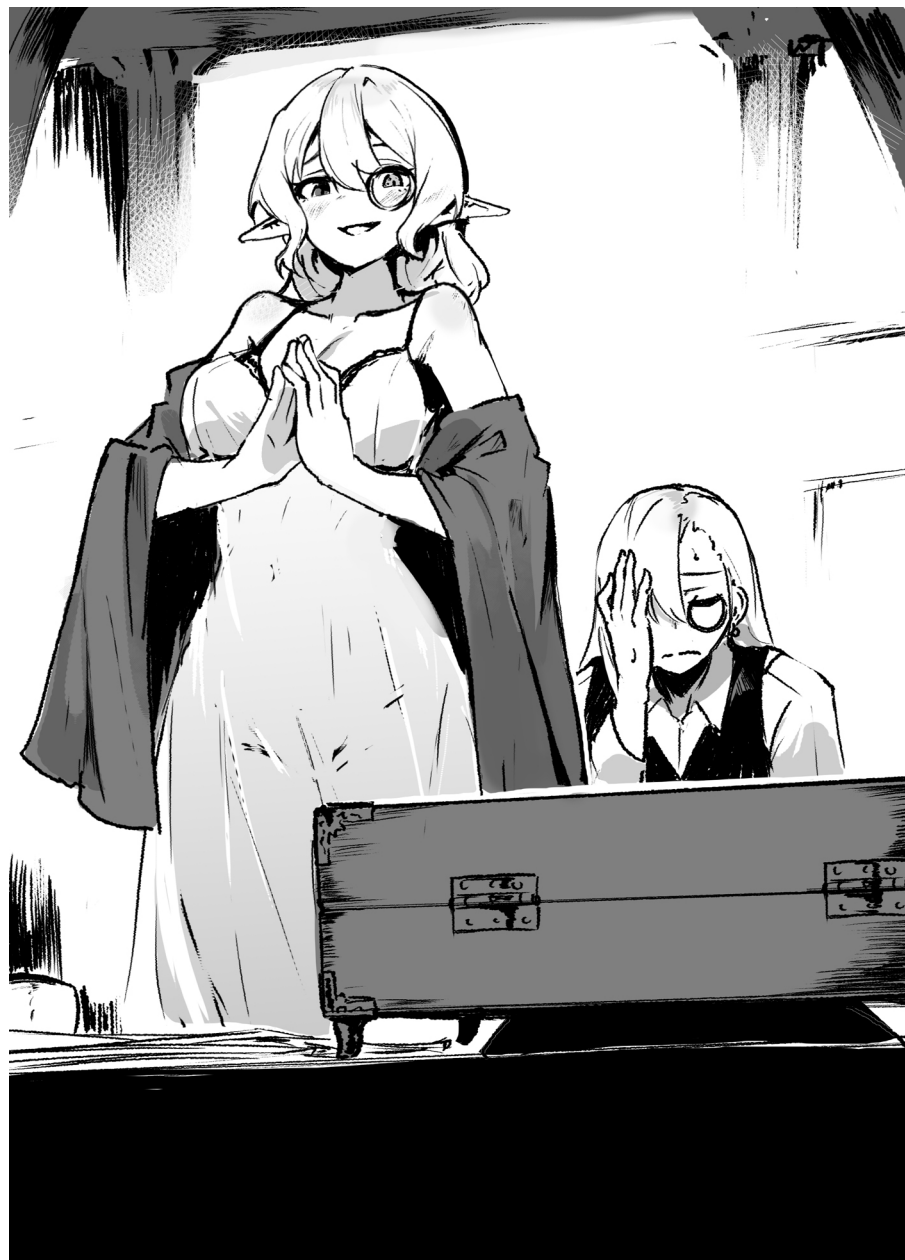
Yet as soon as I brought the monocle up to my eye, it snapped into place. I shook my head back and forth, but it clung tightly to my skin and didn’t even get close to budging; in fact, I couldn’t even feel the coolness of the metal itself.

However, when I tried to remove it, it fell into my hand without any resistance. I accidentally brushed against the lens, owing to my unfamiliarity with eyewear, but that too failed to leave any marks.

...How much cutting-edge technology is loaded in this tiny thing?

“Come, we’re about to begin,” Lady Agrippina said. “Forget the details and put it on already.”

I did as she commanded and the madam began to rub her hands together—a mannerism I found particularly occidental—as if she were about to dig into a gourmet dish. She inserted the key with awesome gravity and opened the latch.



Its breathtaking presence was the same as always.

However, I wasn't taken by the same revulsion as when I'd first laid eyes on it. I could see an evil *something* akin to black miasma or an infinite bundle of formless appendages wrap around the book. I saw things that I'd never seen before. Upon squinting, the wriggling worms around Lady Agrippina's hands slowly gained definition: most of it was composed of magical formulae, but...was that scripture sandwiched in between?

"I see," she hummed. "My hopes had been high, but this truly is the real deal. Even with great alterations to the text, even in a language unknown to the original...to think it would be *this* impressive."

Encased in the oxymoron of holy magic, the madam's fingers ran across the book's cover. As she did, strands of her protective layer frayed and scattered. An equal or perhaps greater number of the same came to replace their lost comrades, but seeing my fears substantiated did little to ease my anxiety.

I knew *this thing would curse me just by touching it*. Locked up as it had been, I patted myself on the back for having lugged this thing back in my knapsack.

Although Lady Agrippina stood the tome upright to spare me from facing its text, pure dread began flooding out as soon as she cracked it open, leaving me little time to appreciate her consideration.

There was nothing behind me. I knew there wasn't, but I could feel *something* creeping up. The tingling hallucination of that same something brushing against my skin caused me to grab myself in reflex, but all I felt were the goosebumps forming underneath my clothes.

Faint sounds tickled my senses—or perhaps they weren't sounds at all. All at once, like a whispering voice and a swarm of buzzing insects, the slimy noise rushed through a packed crowd to crawl into my ear.

As the whispering encroached farther into my inner ear, they gained vigor, and with it, meaning. My mind began to curl around notions not meant to be thought...until a frightful, world-shattering howl shocked me back to reality. The shriek heralded ruin: it was like broken glass being rubbed together beside an oilless machine running itself into the ground. This violation of mind was accompanied by a short burst of will that I'd grown used to in the past few days.

Getting a hold of my thoughts, I realized that my hands were no longer cradling myself, but a sword: unhindered by any sheath, the black steel of the Craving Blade appeared in my arms.

It shouted messages laden with warnings and threats at the tome,

whittling away at the miasma it had spilt. At once, Lady Agrippina took note of the new arrival of malicious energy and looked up from the text with a raised eyebrow.

“Huh,” she said.

That was it.

My employer immediately returned her attention to the book and sat quietly for some time. Her immersed gaze stared holes into the first page, but she herself didn’t move a muscle.

How long had this gone on? The steaming red tea had long since gone cold, and even the pot it had been poured from was devoid of warmth by the time she finished pondering the contents of the first page.

Satisfied with her understanding, Lady Agrippina slowly reached for her monocle. For the first time, I saw the light jade of her heterochromous eye unobstructed by anything. Behind glass, it had appeared like the leaves of a willow filtering a gentle sun; now I witnessed the true hue that crept below.

The green was not the product of an excess in pigment, but of some precipitate ceaselessly churning around and around in the rippling surface of her iris. A disturbingly alien glimmer squirmed in her eye as it made off with the meaning concealed in the words it read. Where I expected the gentle arc of an eyeball, I found a lake choked with algae, tides surging from the corrosive gasses shooting up from the muddy bed. Eventually, the sublime horror of watching her outstripped that which I felt from the tome itself, and I turned away.

“I’d done a bit of digging when I noticed that presence around you, and I knew you’d bring me something fascinating,” Lady Agrippina said. “Well, we shall save that for another time.”

She closed the book with a thump, followed by a creaking hinge and the click of a lock. Then I heard a quiet clack of metal, likely from reequipping her eyepiece. She ordered me to look up, and I did so to see her taking a drag from the pipe she ordinarily summoned.

The madam rested one arm on the couch’s armrest and wearily puffed a cloud of smoke. It seemed that the tome had been enough to drain even her.

“A compelling read, that one. I’ll need to make a legitimate effort to study the text... Anyhow, the preamble was—”

“I’m fine, thank you!” I thrust out my hands to cut her off both verbally and physically.

For whatever reason, Lady Agrippina was wide eyed with surprise. After another puff or two from her pipe, she quietly said, “And here I had thought you’d ask to know after it was all done.”

“I’ve learned when to fold my hand,” I said.

Sure, I’d brought countless tales of adventure to life in my time,

but I'd walked in the shoes of just as many unarmed—not to say that arms would help—investigators snooping around foreign lands overrun with fear. I *knew*. Some things were meant to stay unknown. The perverse corners of my heart whispered to me that that knowledge would open new avenues of strength—that it would give me access to pages my current blessing wouldn't even let me look at.

All my training as an investigator cried out with the hammer of experience in hand: *get a grip!* it shouted, driving nails into my unrestrained curiosity.

My cacodaemoniacal inner voice likely wasn't *wrong*, but as was often the case with these sorts of systems, the tradeoff was sure to be greater than the reward. If nothing else, the mythical and magical in these tales had always made me stop and ask, "Do we *really* need this?"

I had Elisa, Margit, and now Mika counting on me; I couldn't afford to lose this character sheet, for their sakes. I wasn't about to let myself lose all that made me me on the inside while retaining this fleshy shell.

"Oh," Lady Agrippina mumbled, "what a shame."

I internally flipped her remorseless villainy the bird and used my finest manners to put in a request for a short leave.

[Tips] The sanity of those who achieve great things constantly comes under question, and perhaps nothing demonstrates this principle more than the various traits and skills that cannot be imagined—let alone acquired—without delving into madness.

This is a clear warning from the gods to their mortal subjects that they are better off without such knowledge.

Setting out on a journey is hard, but getting back is just as bad. Aside from unpacking, long trips come with laundry to clean—instantaneously with magic, but still—and a giant backlog of chores that accumulate while you're away. Any souvenirs need to be distributed to those who treat you well in daily life, and letters of gratitude are in order for those who treated you well during the vacation.

In my case, my souvenirs didn't amount to much. Being placed in between the imperial capital and the true North, the "local" foods of the region hadn't been all that different from Berylinian cuisine. I'd brought back baked goods made from acorn flour, but any noble would think twice if offered food this shabby.

I handed my large bag of pastries to the Krahenschanze clerks I'd befriended, and they accepted my meager gift with smiles on their

faces. Sitting here at the front desk meant they had to be of considerable stature, but they were bighearted folks who recognized that I'd strained my scant wallet in a show of thanks.

They didn't voice a single complaint; in fact, they gave me a small bag of hard candies in return, blurring the lines as to why I'd showed up in the first place. Well, whatever, the inclination to spoil children was but a facet of adulthood.

Speaking of, my visit to Lady Leizniz's to report my safe return added another tally on the chalkboard of memories I'd do my best to erase from memory and writing. If nothing else, I would never come to understand the values of a ghastly spirit passionately screaming, "Being able to tell that you're cross-dressing at a glance is its own form of perfection!"

After a day of running around the capital, Elisa was finally beginning to calm down from the separation anxiety and shock of hearing that I'd been wounded. As I put her to bed, the first snow set in on the region, and with it came a summons from Lady Agrippina.

No matter the era and no matter the culture, unsavory talks were to begin only after the little ones were safe in the land of dreams.

"Now then..."

I returned from Elisa's bedroom to find that my liege had changed out of her thin pajamas in the short time I'd been away and into a proper gown, complete with a monocle. However, the glassware adorning the greener eye was not the same as her usual eyepiece.

The madam's standard monocle was unembellished, but this one had an intricate pattern—wait, were those letters?—of fine gold wire that gave off powerful waves of arcane energy.

On my first night back, something equally as ineffably fearsome as the cursed compendium had surfaced in her eye; as the keeper of that chromatic nightmare, I was sure the gold and glass had some sort of deeper meaning.

"Show me," she commanded.

I didn't need to waste time asking what she meant. For the umpteenth time since I'd returned, I let out a sad, tired sigh and said, "Come."

My order spanned all of a single syllable, but the intent contained within was definite. Imbued with meaning, my voice soaked into the fabric of reality, completing the mission it had been entrusted with.

There was no dramatic production; like a coin knocked off the table subsequently clattering on the floor, the sword that had appeared in my hand had always been a mere inevitability. Despite its heft, the Craving Blade stuck to my being was sickeningly comfortable in the hand.

Just in case, I'd bet on one-in-a-million odds and had tried

throwing it away a few times on the way home. Of course, it had shown back up beside me like a haunted doll every time. On top of that, last night it had popped up of its own volition and did the same when I uttered a single word; it was comical how unfunny the situation was.

“My... How grand. No bend in space-time, no distortion of matter, and it isn’t even physically parasitic, yet it responds to your voice all the same.”

Lady Agrippina showed no surprise at the Craving Blade’s manifestation. While there was no room to doubt her irredeemable character, seeing her leap straight to thinking aloud reminded me of her great academic genius. Rather, I supposed it was that same talent that had kept this laboratory—or more aptly, this lounge—untouched in the two decades she’d been gone.

“That was practically a miracle,” she said.

“A miracle?”

I wanted to point out that an unholy relic that pleaded at my pillowside for me to use it night in and night out didn’t deserve to be described in such splendid terms, but I knew that wasn’t what she meant. The madam was talking of miracles in the sense of those techniques listed in the Faith category—the sacred powers of gods.

Deities were keepers of the physical realm, responsible for revising and retouching the world. Tasked with the burden of preventing life and culture from backpedaling, they alone had the authority to skip stitches in the quilt of existence without breaking the rules. Despite having their own limitations and quarrels, none could refute that the sanctity of their strength was far out of our reach.

“...You’re telling me this abominable sword is using *miracles*?”

I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say. Perhaps she’d meant to say “curses” instead. *Ow, hey, quit squeezing my brain with your complaints! Maybe it’s finally time to pick up a mental barrier...*

“Yes, miracles. I sense no mystic discharge, no physical irregularities, and the world itself hasn’t bothered to punish it with the cost of breaking its rules. Leaping through space clearly defies common logic, so to avoid penalty for such feats is clear indication that the phenomenon is considered ‘natural’ in some way—thus, a miracle.”

The scum of the earth wore the cool expression of a real scientist as she explained. Her firm gaze and confident tone made it clear she was not toying with me as she so often did.

“Magic, no matter how expertly woven, is an affront to the natural order.”

She flicked her pointer finger up and a point of light emerged at the tip.

“A simple speck of illumination is hardly worthy of being dubbed magic, but even so, it is the product of forcefully bending the universe to my will. There are unavoidable points of incongruence, and there will remain evidence of my tampering once finished.”

The orb leapt forth, drawing a gentle arc with its trail. Suddenly, it stopped, and just as I thought it would turn around, it shot upward and exploded. Once it was gone, it left behind a spiky bubble like one might see in a comic book; clearly, Lady Agrippina had exaggerated its aftereffects to make her point.

Magecraft as a whole was the process of invoking articles from the lawbook of reality and reshaping them to suit one’s needs. Long ago, when she’d pushed me into taking my first sorcerous steps, this master of mine had likened it to skipping a stitch in the large, intricate work of knitting we lived in.

How ingenious a metaphor that had been.

As the crochet hook pierces the surface, the uneven spacing warps its neighboring thread, and the unoccupied space left behind will remain to catch a discerning eye. No matter how carefully a mage composes their spells, evidence of their work is sure to remain.

“With meticulous diligence our traceable prints may approach invisibility. Alas, to cross that bound is a futile hope, and even this pitiful example no better than a piece of flint will create a trail in its wake. Consider a glass of salt water: you may dilute its flavor to be undetectable, but that does nothing to remove the solute in any real sense.”

Apparently, the open seams caused by our meddling were impossible to cover up with more arcane trickery. It was much the same as how wiping down a foggy window with a dry cloth did little to clear all the droplets, and any attempt would simply leave more marks of where the cloth had been used.

No matter how neatly the strokes had been made, a gentle breath revealed all the marks on the glass. In the same vein, hiding evidence of magic with more magic was a difficult, fruitless task.

“On the other hand, miracles are *corrections* to the current state of things. The gods are allotted short windows in which to edit the original blueprints of reality, such that their desired outcomes are and have always been.”

While miracles also effectively bent reality to someone’s will, the heavens could reknit the chunk of space-time over which they presided from scratch to blend into the overall artistry. When the divine chose to engage in needlework, they had no need for dyes to change the color, nor shears to change the shape.

“This is one of the fundamental demarcations we magia use to discriminate between magic and miracle. Otherwise, I’m sure the

unheavenly races would have simply classified the gods as users of some advanced form of magic, unworthy of being venerated as superior beings.”

Breezing by the fact that her seemingly respectful statement would likely drive clergymen to pull up their sleeves in preparation for a crusade, Lady Agrippina pointed her outstretched finger at the Craving Blade.

“In summary, that sword is using miracles by the strictest definition of the word.”

“I see...”

“Otherwise, I can only discern that it is immeasurably old...and that it likely lacks the capacity to feed on your soul or sanity or what-have-you.”

You're a liar! I was on the cusp of shouting back at her, but the green twinkle gazing my way had a mysterious persuasiveness to it. I only realized this now that I could see mana a bit more clearly, but there was something unnerving about her left eye...

Still, I couldn't rid myself of the instinctive disbelief in the back of my mind and ended up staring at the Craving Blade. Its fuligin sheen refused all the light flooding into the atelier, and the sight of it alone was enough to breed doubt in the words of a first-rate methuselah researcher.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of shifting cloth as Lady Agrippina reached for the handle. Her pointer finger barely brushed against it, and...

“That, and...I see that it is as loyal as I suspected.”

A small font of blood gushed. That tiny bit of contact had made her finger explode, stripping away enough flesh to expose the bone beneath.

“Wha— Hey?!”

“Ouch... My, it's been some time since I last drew blood. Tearing through all my repellant fields—seriously, what's wrong with this thing?”

Despite the severity of her injury, Lady Agrippina was sucking on her finger, making no more fuss than someone dealing with a hangnail.

No way in hell is that enough to heal you! Also, you sounded like you had a hunch this was going to happen, so why in the gods' name did you try it?!

“What?” she asked. “Experimentation is important. Besides, I wouldn't want to bottle up my curiosity and let it cloud my mind later on.”

I felt like I finally grasped why the methuselah population was so small relative to their capabilities. I definitely recognized the trope of

a group who valued their inquisitive nature over life itself. Their fertility rates were low too, so it was no wonder they couldn't multiply when all their brightest minds were busy doing stuff like this.

"Anyhow," the madam went on, "it seems convenient, so why not take advantage of it? You won't have to lug it around, and you can exploit its recall properties to use it as an infinite projectile."

"Actually, madam," I said, "I experimented with the same idea, but the blade complained. Said that was no way to use a sword."

"What? How obnoxious."

For once, I had to agree with her.

Lady Agrippina pulled her finger out of her mouth, and the bleeding had already stopped. That said, I was caught a bit off guard: I'd thought it would have been completely healed by the time she was done.

"I can more or less tell what you're thinking, but I'm not as well versed in bodily magicks as you might think. Ah, but I did spend a spell delving into neurological magecraft when I had little else to do."

The baffling thought process needed to fiddle with the mind out of *boredom* really highlighted how aloof never-ending life-forms could be. Knowing the brain to be the control tower of thought and applying external stimuli to see the reactions like there was no other logical progression was something I would be out of my depth to comment on.

"Come to think of it," she added, "couldn't you inflict awful injuries if you tricked your enemies into taking this sword in hand? Perhaps it is as outstanding a trap as it is a weapon."

If it was already throwing fits about being thrown, I couldn't help but have a sinking feeling about what would happen to me if I tried something like that.

Loyalty may have made for a better blade, but I would need to test the limits of its devotion at some point. If I ever lost grip of it in the heat of battle, I wouldn't want an ally to have their hands detonate because they were trying to do me a solid; there was only so much one could laugh off over a pint at the pub.

That said, if it had pierced the madam's defensive means—what amounted to the world's most overkill rubber gloves—then the Craving Blade might have had some kind of power to dispel magic. If it could repel or disperse spells that targeted it, then I could rely on it to shield me as a last resort.

Er, wait. Looking back, it hadn't been able to nullify Mika's final tactic of converting spiderwebs into wires. Relying on it so wholly probably wasn't a good idea.

The difficulty of setting up proper tests was part of what made cursed items such a hassle to deal with. It whined for me to carry it

with me wherever I went, but carrying the damned thing presented risk in and of itself. Plus, if it really did employ miracles, handing it over to a church was going to do nothing to impede it.

“Mm, this hurts more than I anticipated. I’m off to the iatrurge’s, so you’re free for the night.”

Lady Agrippina had been staring down her wound and had toughed it out for a while, but at last she grew weary of it and got up to leave the atelier. She walked out on her own two legs, making it clear that she wasn’t bluffing about the pain; complex magic like teleportation was easy to bungle if one wasn’t superbly focused.

Evidently, that monster in a human frame wasn’t totally invincible. Her relatively inadequate defenses were the silver lining in a hopeless situation.

You may question why I immediately began analyzing her strengths under the assumption of combat, but I had archived her in my mind as an enemy as opposed to a connection ages ago. I hadn’t forgotten my original oath to make this villain cry uncle; so far I’d made few promises more grave.

I propped up the Craving Blade against the couch and stretched out on it without reserve—the boss lady wasn’t here, after all. Her taste for luxury lived up to my expectations, and the pillowy cushioning was softer than my own bedding back home. *Mm, so bourgeois...*

The madam’s introduction of yet another difficult decision wove more chaotic knots into the tangled skein of my future. I’d received my blessing to do as I willed, but the diverging stairways leading up to my goals turned choosing a path into a serious challenge—a struggle stemming from privilege to be sure, but rejecting all but one future was arduous.

“Not to mention I have this to worry about...”

I activated my blessing and opened up my skill tree. No matter how user-friendly the interface was, the labyrinthine web was too elaborate to navigate in battle; I hadn’t found the time to explore when we’d been deep inside the ichor maze.

I glanced at my stock of experience points. This too only added fuel to my burning befuddlement.

While not quite outstripping whatever first blood bonus had accompanied my first major quest, I had earned nearly as much as I had at the daemoniac mansion.

This didn’t surprise me: I’d plowed through encounter after encounter, culminating in a major boss fight to clear out a proper dungeon. I’d expected as much for my accomplishments, and my inflated treasury was enough to draft up more than a few dubiously balanced ideas.

Unfortunately...I couldn't make any decision lightly with the road ahead so uncertain.

For example, if I were to change course to become a magus, I would need more than a few scholarly skills to get by. Curiously, I didn't need to explicitly invest in skills to feel comfortable with things I'd been familiar with in my past life, but the rigorous study of wizardry wasn't quite the same as the bachelor's in liberal arts I'd finished at a middling university.

Hiking up my proficiency in the palatial tongue would be a given, and the specialized field would necessitate even more add-ons as expensive as they were niche. Fixing my lowborn accent to not offend social superiors was a must, and I'd need to be able to pen cryptograms like the one Sir Feige had written at a moment's notice.

The cost of acquiring both sides of literary ability would pile up quickly, and I doubted I'd be able to resist the urge to pick up extras like Intuitive Reading or Speed Reading. Rough estimates for the basics put my total at over half my current reserve.

You may wonder what the big deal was over a bunch of dumb letters, but writing was and had been akin to magic—it had been a privilege of the haves since time immemorial. The nobility of Earth had enjoyed power specifically because of their literacy, and the monks endowed with the gift of writing were the freest to interpret their sacrosanct texts.

Words on paper allowed one to skip rungs on the social ladder; something so impactful had to have a complementary price. Rather, the systems wherein guns and maces ruled the land had offered written language at too much of a bargain.

Furthermore, I'd want a better Memory to make my studies and social endeavors smoother, and a higher Mana Capacity was a requirement for both experiments and practical demonstrations.

But with that said...it was pretty cheap, all things considered. Normal people had to spend years of their lives to amass these kinds of skills and traits. I could do the same at the press of a button; that was markedly unfair, even if I did have to risk my life to do so. Seeing countless sleepless nights of study boiled down to the same value as a few seconds of life-or-death combat really put into perspective how callous the world was.

I'd felt this gut-wrenching feeling before, but where? Oh, of course: this was the same emotion that arose when one came home with an annual bonus only to be met with end-of-year expenses like health insurance waiting a little ways ahead—the same as looking at a juicy balance in one's bank account knowing that none of it was free to actually use.

Argh, this is so frustrating! I could feel my intestines tying

themselves into a knot. I couldn't deny being at least somewhat enamored by the idea of being a magus. I mean, I'd be a *magus* for crying out loud! I wouldn't be some nobody chanting spells, but a recognized scholar! There wasn't a person alive who didn't want to hear the words, "Excuse me, *Professor*."

Uh...maybe that was a bit off the mark, but whatever.

Regardless, I had amassed enough to bring one of Dexterity or Hybrid Sword Arts to Scale IX and have a bit of pocket change left over. Part of the goal I'd set for myself when planning out my final build was now within reach, and the ambition that realization sparked was difficult to contain. I know I'd talked about recognizing the limits of a lone blade, but my long commitment to the craft had left me fixated on the idea.

Crap. As soon as I began thinking about swords, the troublemaker at my feet started spewing toxic waves, begging to be used. *No one said anything about swinging you around this very instant. Besides, my add-ons are all for one-handed swords, so I'm really not equipped to handle a zweihander.*

As I shook the thoughts out of my brain, my earring jingled. The crisp, dainty chime evoked the same feeling as a certain someone's whispers; with it came a phantom scent that tickled my nostalgic sentiment. A familiar tingle lapped at my tailbone, slowly traveling up my spine to caress my brain.

"Yeah...I know."

I had left my hometown behind with a promise that I would end my servitude within five years, all to play out the role of a cool brother protecting his baby sister. My initial impetus was all the purpose I needed. Besides, the burning passion for the adventures I'd spent a lifetime drowning in had yet to flicker away in this new world. Not even the most painful, agonizing moments of facing my own end could curb my yearning for more.

I had thrown myself into the jaws of death to save Elisa from kidnappers, fended off a daemonic surprise attack while I was resting, and walked on a knife's edge to take down the powerful ogre in the dilapidated manor. I had shouldered a duty to carry Helga's memory in the deepest corners of my heart; I had fought tooth and nail to drag myself out of an ichor maze with a sworn friend by my side. Every single episode had been traumatic in its own right, and I'd internally vowed to renounce mortal combat forever after each.

Yet my mind wandered to when I'd rescued Charlotte and won a fey knife that shone brightest when I was at my most desperate; to *her* last remnant which twinkled back at me to this day; to how Mika and I had cheered when we'd heard the bounty for the bandits we'd rounded up. The moment of fulfillment as I felled an insurmountable

foe to conquer an ichor maze was blindingly bright in my memory. Every single one of these cherished events had come with unparalleled joy.

The emotion was the same as, and yet altogether different from, the pen-and-paper adventures I'd shared with my dear colleagues a world away. This new-made joy reeked of blood and iron, but it was just as unforgettable as what we had shared through scribbled notes, clattering dice, and fits of hysterical laughter.

I wasn't wishing for something as moronic as cheap thrills, nor was I stupid enough to deny the value in a quiet life. My parents now and my parents then had taught me how precious a thing peaceful days could be.

"But...I just can't give up on it."

When all was said and done, my adventures had been fun—even if death grazed the bridge of my nose, even if despair nipped at my ankles on my path through hell. I'd only done this twice, and both times had been short enough to fit in a single session, but as idiotic as it was, I looked back on those experiences with deep adoration.

Sharing supper at a happy dinner table, hooting and hollering at a bar, and leaning against another's shoulder for a muted chat were all occasions to treasure; yet the heat of quixotic life had already permeated my being. It was incredible how excited I became after the fact when, while searching for an exit to the ichor maze, I'd cursed out the brain-dead GM for their godsawful balance, swearing to never engage with their work again.

At first, this longing felt like something I'd left behind somewhere in the deep past, but it sat so very right in my soul. Like a weight dropping straight into my heart, I caught the feeling and accepted it without resistance. Chewing on it, I found it to contain the same flavor as the walk to the train station after a completed session, full of friendly chatter.

It's over, but there's always next time; there'll be a next time because it's over.

I think I was just a fool, fated to spend the rest of my life griping about life-threatening perils and fondly reminiscing as soon as the danger had passed. I knew that the felt-lined table of adventure required a steep buy-in: I was betting my own life. But even then, I knew I'd push all my chips to the center as soon as the next session began.

"Hah," I chuckled in realization. "I'm the same as them."

Sixty flat drachmae wasn't enough to retire for life, but anyone else would have taken it to improve their quality of life and treat themselves to a small splurge. Yet here I was, with my sister's future and my own wanderlust the only things on my mind—it was plain as

day that I wasn't in a position to be judging Lady Agrippina or Lady Leizniz.

And in that case, I would see this through to the end.

Besides, if I really ended up wanting the prestige, I could always come back after I was done having fun. Lady Leizniz had once grumbled about the geezers she had to teach, so the College probably didn't have an age limit.

There was only one thing left to do. I peered into the sheets of data and dove into my own world.

"I wonder what I should take next..."

[Tips] Traits applied via this blessing cannot trigger major changes in the user's personality.

Winter of the Thirteenth Year

Bonds with Connections

Some games include systems of rapport to clearly define player interactions with friendly NPCs. Ranges are defined for professional partnerships at arm's length, friendships built on mutual ties, and even undying romantic love. But beware: the actions taken over the course of a session are sure to affect one's social ties.

"Mm... So cold..."

While I couldn't handle the bitterest of frosts, I appreciated the brisk air of winter. The crisp morning stung my nostrils as I inhaled, but I could feel the deep breath rinse my lungs clean as I blew out the lingering cold. It was a sure way to rouse me, even as my warm sheets tried to pull me back in.

Even with the Ashen Fraulein's thoughtful care, the low streets of the imperial capital abounded with the chill of a dark morning. Winter saw little sunlight, and I needed Cat Eyes just to make things out, even though I hadn't awoken any earlier than usual.

"It sure is colder here than back home..."

The silkie had been kind enough to prepare me a warm pail of water. Raw well water at this time of year was so cold that I often felt like just touching it would peel my skin off. The capital's wells weren't connected to natural groundwater: they pumped from a system of aqueducts spanning both below and above ground, making the temperature fluctuate with the seasons.

"But they say it snows here every year," I mumbled to myself. "I guess it's bound to be different."

Berylin was situated in Rhine's northern reach, and I'd never experienced weather this frigid back home in Konigstuhl. I'd spent many a year without snow there; maybe comparing its climate to that of a land with frequent sleet was a fallacious idea to begin with.

Still, there was always a bigger fish, and the capital was far from the coldest place in the Empire. The further north one went, the more ruthlessly the elements pierced one's protective layers; slightly to our south, the great spirit of hoarfrost presided over the southeastern mountain range. I didn't freeze to death the instant the fire went out,

so I had it good by comparison.

Still convincing myself of my relative fortune as I wiped down my face, when I opened my eyes, a small vial that hadn't been there before entered my view. Smelling faintly of milk and olives, the salve inside was a moisturizer to fend off the dry air. These sorts of things were much too costly for commoners to regularly purchase. I had no idea where she'd gotten her hands on it.

"A word of thanks for the Fraulein's goodwill."

Regardless, questioning its origins would do me no favors, so I offered my gratitude and decided to help myself. I sat down in front of the foggy mirror a tenant from yesteryear had left behind, and peeled off the bandages covering the remaining wounds from my...

"Huh?"

I peered into the mirror to find that my face was absolutely flawless. Er, not to say that I'd taken a skill or trait to attain unparalleled beauty; I mean to say that the scabs dotting my profile had given way to silky-smooth skin. Not only that, but the scars I'd been secretly looking forward to were nowhere to be found!

I ran my fingers across my mug in disbelief, but the only tactile feedback I found was that of a baby's bottom. I could have sworn I'd heard the iatruerge sigh about how my injuries were going to leave a mark.

What? How? Where'd they go?! And here I'd been so excited to finally start looking like a man: after all, facial scars told the badass story of a personal history rife with conflict. Having vanquished a foe so mighty, I'd been ready to bear a physical memento of our fierce battle. In the far future, young adventurers would look up to me and ask, "Where'd you get that scar?" and I'd tell the tale with a knowing smirk plastered on my face...

Or at least, I would have, if the things hadn't up and vanished with my fleeting fantasies. Losing the scabs was nice and all, but how had they disappeared without leaving so much as a dent?

What's more, I'd begun sprouting the first signs of a mustache by this point in my first life. Looking back, I remembered my brother Heinz bragging about his facial hair when he'd been my age.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine—and most nations in the West—saw the beard as a marker of adulthood. Growing one might have been easy, but keeping it neatly trimmed was a far greater challenge. Maintaining stately facial hair was evidence of time and manpower spent, and some races went so far as to decorate their dignified scruff with ribbons or golden bands. Of course, the trouble it took to remain totally clean shaven also spoke to one's stature, but most preferred the majesty of a bountiful beard.

Like the scars, I secretly longed to grow my own one day. I hadn't

ever been sent overseas—to say, the Middle East, where hairless men were sometimes looked down upon even in the modern day—during my time in Japan, giving me no excuse to cultivate my facial hair. But all the handsome actors in my favorite fantasy films graced the screens with grand manes lining their chins.

My father in Konigstuhl kept a neat beard, and my oldest brother's had nearly fully grown in by the time he came of age. I clearly did not want for genetics, and I'd spent countless days in my youth daydreaming of how I would style my own when the time came.

Yet in spite of it all, my face was positively velvety. I rubbed myself over with inhuman Dexterity, but my sensitive fingertips picked up so little resistance that the whole affair began to feel fishy.

“...Ursula.”

“Did you call, O Beloved One? How busy you must be to be up before the moon hides away.”

I called up the svartalf to confirm my suspicions, and she appeared in the darkness like she'd been there all along. Dawn had yet to break, and with the False Moon nearly full, I caught a full-sized night fairy's reflection in the corner of the mirror. Although I wasn't exactly keen on letting her lounge on my bed like she owned the place, I decided to look past her poor manners for hospitality's sake.

“My wounds are gone and I can't grow a beard. What do you know?”

Recognizing that it was hopeless to win a verbal exchange—why did every woman around me have a tongue of silver?—I kept my question blunt. She raised her head from my pillow and answered without a care in the world.

“Hmm, I wouldn't know anything about wounds or facial hair. Personally, I'm quite particular to boys with scars. Lunacy shines brightest under moonlight, and I find those blemishes reminiscing over the mad heat of battle poetic and beautiful.”

Aha, so you don't know anything “personally,” huh?

“Lottie.”

“Hiya! Need something?”

My second suspect responded as soon as I called for her, gently floating down onto my head. The waxing Hollow Moon did nothing for the sylphid's height, and her appearance was as fittingly fey as ever as she tucked herself into my hair.

“Did you do something about my wounds and beard?”

“Huh?! Uh... Um...”

“Never mind. Don't bother answering.”

Between Ursula's roundabout testimony and Charlotte's obvious stammering, the culprit was readily apparent. I lurched forward and buried my head in my arms; the sylphid hovered away before she

could fall, coming up to my face with puppy-dog eyes.

“Um... I’m sorry. Lottie just thought you’d be sad if you got cuts and stuff that stayed. Peoples worry about ouchies on their faces, right? And, and my friends too! All my friends say it’s not cute to have ouchies there...”

I see. So the alfar had done something to prevent my wounds from leaving scars once they healed. *You lot sure do have a lot of tricks up your sleeves.*

“No,” I said, “you know what? Don’t worry about it. Really, it’s fine. I’m not that upset about it anyway.”

Seeing her hang her head in shame made me feel like *I* was in the wrong, however untrue I knew that was. That said, I genuinely wasn’t that mad, so I was happy to forgive her knowing that she had my best interests at heart.

I was still going to dock a candy drop from snack time, though.

The Empire traded for sugar with its satellite states bordering the southern sea at favorable rates, so it wasn’t particularly expensive to get ahold of...but it also wasn’t particularly cheap.

Hm? What’s that? I’m a cheapskate? Forgive me; I couldn’t help the lightness of my purse. The ten drachmae I’d gotten from Sir Feige had mostly gone to extending Elisa’s scholarship, and the rest had gone home to my parents and the newborn nephew I hadn’t been able to celebrate.

Charlotte’s jaw dropped to the floor and she began to sulk. However, one thing bothered me about her confession: for all that she’d said about scars, she hadn’t touched on the matter of facial hair.

“Which means the beard was the work of...”

As I voiced my doubts, I heard the sound of ceramics clinking together as if the one holding them had jerked in surprise. I glanced behind me in the mirror and saw that the bucket at my bedside had been replaced with a steaming cup of chicory red tea. Never before had I heard dining ware clatter in this house when receiving my morning brew; for the rule to be broken now pointed to a conclusion I hardly needed to restate.

“...Ashen Fraulein.”

“I can’t help it,” she says. “Beards aren’t cute.” Ursula spoke for the tight-lipped housekeeper.

...Oh, fine. Have it your way—do whatever you want. I couldn’t help but be surprised that my reserved and responsible caretaker would play such tricks on me, but then again, silkies had a reputation for their penchant for mischief. I would have preferred a less noticeable prank, but I supposed I had to live with it.

As I stroked my featureless chin, awash with melancholy, realization struck. The alfar liked children with blond hair and blue

eyes. The two latter points were what had drawn them to me in the first place, but who was to say that youthful innocence wasn't just as important to them?

Furthermore, Ursula had stated that she wouldn't know anything about "wounds or facial hair," but she had conveniently left out her relation to anything else.

"Hey, Ursula."

"Mm? Is there more, Beloved One? I'm getting sleepy, you know..."

"Looking at the rest of my family, I'm going to grow pretty tall."

In fact, I'd already allocated enough points to get me past the 180-centimeter mark when fully grown. Imperial mensch were blessed with sizable physiques, so this wasn't enough for someone to consider me especially tall...unless they were obsessed with childish cuteness.

"Wh-Why do you bring that up?"

I had never—and I mean *never*—heard Ursula stumble over her words. Her shifting eyes were the nail in the coffin.



Huh, I see. So that's how you want to play it.

I whirled around, summoning an Unseen Hand to uncoil my trusty loop of rope and propelled it toward the bed. I wasn't using it as a whip or anything: my invisible fingers pinched the tip, leading it into position to apprehend the guilty fey.

No sooner had I thrust forth the rope than Ursula disappeared with a short yelp, leaving only my blankets within the lasso. I heard the Ashen Fraulein drop something in a panic as soon as she sensed our scrap; an errant spring breeze whizzed out of the window I'd opened for fresh air.

"All of you?! Hey! This isn't funny, dammit! You better not have done anything! Come back here! Show yourselves!"

This was the first time I'd ever lost my temper enough to shout at my ephemeral company, but not even the threat of fey retribution could stymie my rage. Height was more than a matter of personal preference: I needed that to do my job as a swordsman!

Every inch lost affected my arms as well, shortening the reach of my swings by proxy. Those who would laugh this off as an acceptable margin of error were fools; whether a wound proved fatal oftentimes came down to mere millimeters.

Furthermore, weight was king in close-quarters combat, and the total load of muscle a body could bear directly scaled with height. Losing that dimension put me at an inherent disadvantage. The drama of a David felling a Goliath was electrifying, but the feat itself was daunting. At the very minimum, if I were to face a large man with parity in skill—magic notwithstanding—the odds would be insurmountably in his favor. Why else would the boxing associations of Earth have placed such stringent restrictions on their weight classes?

My fury at having my life toyed with flooded out in the form of angry yelling. Alas, all my shouting faded unanswered into the quiet of early morning.

[Tips] Blessings and protections require the will of the conferrer, but not always the conferred. Otherwise, shades of gold and blue would not so commonly arise among the young souls departing for heaven or those who never return from the deepest woods.

Last night's snowfall had painted the town in a layer of white, and the virgin snow crackled under my feet with every step. The burnt vermilion of brick peeked out from beneath the bleached landscape, and the faint blue finish of mystic street lamps made for a dreamlike

scene.

As I swallowed the chilly air like a tall glass of ice water, I felt like I'd taken in the slowly brightening sky of the fading night with it. If the night sky were ever bottled up as a wine, surely it would taste like this: crisp and sweet, its flavor only lingering in the nose for a brief moment.

I let out a long, slow, deep breath; my anger was finally fading. At this rate, neither Ursula nor Lottie would respond to me for a while, and the Ashen Fraulein never showed herself to begin with. It seemed their plan of action was to wait out what seemed like a childish tantrum, but they would do well to realize that I wouldn't forget this so easily.

Showing up to my morning duties in such a foul mood would be improper of me, so I'd come out on a walk to enjoy the sights of an awakening town. Although I hadn't left the Empire's borders, my first winter in the capital felt like I was in a foreign land, and this peculiar feeling improved my mood even more than I'd hoped.

That said, not wanting to let myself loosen up too much before work, I couldn't bask in wintry sentiment forever. I wasn't going to let myself freeze up no matter how romantic the nipping air was. I activated an Insulating Barrier with the Selective Screening add-on to push away the cold air and apply a hydrophobic coating to my boots.

This had been one of my purchases with the ichor maze payday. Combat may be the meat and potatoes of TRPGs, but I'd always wished to have access to the convenient lifestyle skills that popped up during role-playing segments; these were a key element to the craft in their own right.

Stuffing myself fat with cotton or weighing myself down with a heavy leather coat proved a massive bother, and I figured relying on half-baked space-bending magic as my sole means of true defense wasn't ideal. My answer had been to pick up a mystic barrier at a III: Apprentice level. All the quintessential barrier did was impede physical and magical contact: conceptually, it was a boring, paper-thin layer that denied entry to unwanted phenomena.

However, its simplicity lent itself to resource efficiency, and up at Scale V, the activation would become startlingly quick, making it usable as a twitch reaction to deflect arrows and middling swords. I could also weave them at an angle to divert attacks to get some extra value, and a little ingenuity let me repel water, wind, and cold as an all-in-one weather shield.

Walking through the snow without worrying about my clothes and hair getting damp was a wonderful feeling. Never again would I have to scurry for a change of clothes upon tripping, and my eyes were safe from the tear-inducing pain of strong tempests wicking

away their moisture.

Man, this was such a good find. The barrier was as useful in daily life as it was in the heat of battle. I could even wrap it around my hands when drawing water to prevent my skin from cracking. I'd swiped the idea from Lady Agrippina's thaumaturgic gloves, thinking that I might hold some experiments of my own; clearly, I'd made the right call.

I arrived at the College very pleased with my new toy, and headed to the stables as I did every morning. No matter how much frigid snow piled up on the land, the stablehands showed up without fail to care for their dependents, and I was much the same.

"Hey, whoa. Good morning to you guys too."

I pacified the crowd of horses that came up wanting to play—I made an excessively long detour to avoid that stupid unicorn—and finally arrived at my stable to find that Castor and Polydeukes were as full of life as ever, despite the gelid dawn. Once more, I was made to marvel at how hardy these creatures were. They were inherently warm, sometimes even producing the kind of heat that would knock out a mensch. The steam they could generate after a good workout proved that they didn't need magic or overcoats to withstand the elements, unlike us.

"Hey, hey, quit biting me... What? Are you bored?"

Polydeukes nuzzled up against my back as I cleaned his waste and replaced his bedding. He nibbled on my clothes with a snort, begging me to take him out; only a few days ago, he'd gotten to run to his heart's content. A horse had to run to fully exercise its purpose—especially these two warhorses. Every generation of their ancestors had been handpicked for their exemplary physiques, and I was well aware that they were itching to get some exercise.

"I'll ask them to let you run a lot today, okay? And I'll take you two out for a long ride sometime before the snow piles up, I promise."

I stroked his long face and let him lick me in mine. I stared into his eyes and his solemn violet irises stared back. Though they lacked the tool of language, the twinkle in his eyes felt to me a testament that these trusty beasts of burden rivaled our own intelligence. With his gaze alone, he asked me, "Do you swear it?"

"I wouldn't lie to you," I said with a pat. "I'll invite Mika so all four of us can go."

Finally satisfied, the first half of the Dioscuri stopped gnawing on my garb. Communicating with them like this made horses feel so very human. They resisted bad treatment as a matter of course, and forcing a saddle on one was far from enough to tame it. These proud animals were the types to shake off an unwanted jockey or die trying.

Perhaps that was why they responded so kindly to my sincerity.

Of course, I couldn't take it easy now: spoiling one brother was sure to upset the other if I didn't give him equal treatment, so I made my way over to Castor. Here, too, I had a similar exchange that ended with my face covered in drool—I couldn't bring myself to just deny them with a barrier—so I cast Clean on myself as I did for the line of fellow horse keepers waiting with copper pieces in hand. I'm happy to report that nowadays, many of these folks were kind enough to wave to me in town whenever our paths crossed.

"Excuse me," I said. "If it's not too much trouble..."

"Don't worry, I know the drill. I'll let them run all they want."

Among the many stablehands to whom I offered my services, I asked the one in charge of the steeds' physical activity for a favor. Horses had the emotional capacity to feel depressed if the stress of staying locked indoors piled up, so the management here scheduled time for them to run. In place of a tip, I thanked the exercise director with a free Clean and made my way inside Krahenschanze.

"Huh," I said to myself, "what's with all the people?"

Winter's grip let off the moment I stepped through the front door. Visually temperate like an ancient banking institution, the main hall had also been carefully tuned to disallow the interior from deviating more than a few degrees off of the most agreeable of temperatures.

In the wee hours of the morning, I expected only to see students picking at requests on the bulletin board, the clerks at the front desk, and those who had to partake in an early lecture...but not today.

It didn't take a master detective to realize some well-to-do members of the gentry were paying the College a visit. Silk and golden thread were accentuated with sparkling gems for buttons, and I spied mantles imbued with personal climate control, to say nothing of the fancy wands that prioritized form over function.

Those waiting at the wings wore lavish outfits deliberately tweaked to remain slightly out of fashion; only the richest and most influential could afford to dress their attendants as proper nobles. Beside them, even the bodyguards were equipped with stylish swords, though their attire remained simple to prioritize ease of movement.

In total, there were two or three separate groups within the crowd. They chatted with one another with perfectly set smiles. I didn't know whether they were waiting for more company or killing time while the clerks filed away paperwork, but I found it curious that they had business at the College.

Researchers and professors were bureaucrats in their own rights, and many orbited court politicians to offer their counsel, but the magia were generally the ones paying the visits, not the patrons.

Those returning to their Berylin estates from across the land for the many social events held in winter generally held property near the

palace. It was a straight, short shot north from here, but I wondered what would bring these haughty patricians here on their own two feet. I would have expected them to send a messenger bearing an invitation to a tea party held elsewhere.

Whoops, I thought, turning away. My inquisitive nature had gotten the better of me, and the sharp bodyguards caught me staring. I decided to make a tactical retreat before they could scold me for my poor manners. This was all worlds apart from me anyway. Nothing good could come from a lowly commoner like me trying to get involved...a lesson which my own master, Lady Agrippina, taught me with every fiber of her being.

"My, you're here already? Time certainly flies."

I entered the madam's mystic greenhouse, bathed in gentle sunlight wholly inappropriate considering the season. Of all the things I'd expected to see, her buck naked frame was not one of them.

Her usual chignon had been reduced to a wet mass of free-flowing hair, clinging tightly to the white curvature of her body. Her limbs had an unbelievably normal amount of muscle despite her refusal to exercise, and they drew the eye from her core with aesthetic appeal that rivaled the nude marbles of the Renaissance.

"I have many things to say," I sighed, "but first and foremost, I implore you not to wander about before drying your hair."

Although my liege never failed to laze about in thin garments, this was the first time she'd so brazenly abandoned clothing altogether. Occasionally, her pajamas would slip to reveal a single tit—and no, of course she didn't care—but this was almost enough to make me question whether she was a real noblewoman at all. Yet no matter how impeccably polished this breathing still life was, I didn't even need to roll the dice to succeed in resisting her charm.

"I had a sudden fancy for a bath, you see," she explained, "but the book I brought to pass the time proved a tad too gripping. I'm airing myself out to avoid sweating in my clothes."

"Yes, yes, that's all very well," I replied. "I'd like to set your hair, so would you be so kind as to take a seat?"

Lady Agrippina sat down as if *she* were the one accommodating *me*, but let the records show that all the concessions made were mine. Not wanting to let her drip all over the carpet and make more work for me later, I dispelled the water on her body. I carefully began combing her locks and drying them with a towel; I could have handled this with a quick Cleaning as well, but that invariably led to a lesser final result.

"Ahh," she sighed. "How relaxing. Give me a scalp massage while you're at it, will you?"

"I fear the day isn't long enough for that, madam."

It was remarkable just how insistent she was on marching only to the beat of her own drum. I painstakingly wrung the towel out after every stroke as I patted down her long silver strands. The comb proved exceptionally superfluous with how few knots I encountered, and I felt as though I'd wasted my time caring for an already-superb product as I finished setting her usual hairdo.

"Mm, well done... Now hand me the comb."

"As you will."

My stark-naked employer had oh-so-elegantly pulled out a book with which to busy herself, but now she waited with her hand outstretched. As soon as the comb left my grasp, a blaze of fire ran across its surface. Methuselah bodies were machines efficient enough to produce almost zero waste, but their hair was one of the few exceptions.

Hair could be used as an arcane ingredient, especially when concocting spells to find or target a specific individual. My liege was well aware of her penchant for earning grudges, and thus was very fussy about plugging any leaks—so much so that she refused to lower her guard around her one and only servant, even though she held my life in her hands.

Still, her concerns were valid; one carelessly done errand could turn lethal in an instant. High society was a toxic sea of knavery where crooked souls donned the guise of morality; staying afloat required a constant state of alertness.

"Hmm," Lady Agrippina mused, "shall I partake in breakfast today or no?"

"Madam, I beseech you to dress yourself first."

"But it isn't as if anyone is looking."

Ignoring her sociopathic comment, I forced the madam to change classes from an irredeemable streaker to a beauty rivaling Helen of Troy—in the sense that she too could bring a nation to its knees, albeit physically. I knew that asking her to choose an outfit would only prompt a half-hearted answer, so I brought her a robe that I'd seen her wear often enough.

The madam grumbled to herself as she made herself decent, and it sank in that this woman had truly forgone food, sleep, and drink to read when she'd been on her own. She was a wealthy, hedonistic, silver-haired, mystic-eyed elf (sort of) with a distaste for clothing and an inclination toward remorseless villainy—did she really need *all* of these quirks?

I muttered under my breath that we'd all be better off if she could pawn away some of her character traits as I went to prepare breakfast. Living up to the needs of its finicky clientele, the room service always delivered on time, and I went to wake Elisa after I finished setting the

table.

Elisa's room was the most cramped in the entire workshop, but I use "cramped" here in the monied sense of the word. Two or three normal people could comfortably live in this space: it was around twenty-six square meters in total.

Every visit saw the room more cluttered than the last: the place was buried in gifts fueled by Lady Leizniz's favor. I failed to comprehend how that deranged vitality freak had ended up the way she did, but it was evident that she derived no greater joy than from presenting the objects of her affection with lavish gifts that she personally picked out. In my opinion, it seemed like her long life at the top of the world had eroded her ability to see things from a more normal perspective...but I supposed she was free from the expenses of the living. I guess I couldn't be *too* hard on her.

"Wow, this sure is...something."

Still, her most recent offering may have been the grandest yet: my darling sister—the cutest girl alive—was snoozing away in a bed literally fit for a princess. Three full-grown mensch could complete a yoga routine on the mattress alone, and *obviously*, there were fine silk curtains hanging from the canopy. Elisa was sleeping in conditions far better than the casual hammock her master employed.

On a similar note, the writing desk that had been installed at some point was a first-rate piece of arcane furniture that gained height proportional to its user, and the wardrobe that gobbled up the never-ending stream of new outfits had been magically enhanced into a multi-room walk-in closet.

If these unhinged feature lists weren't enough, the desk had been graced with paper and pens extravagant enough to line a working aristocrat's table. With their thin layer of dust, they spoke to a nauseating wish to receive a letter penned in my sister's big, round, cutesy-wootsy lettering.

I mean, I could see why someone might dote on our family's little girl—she was the cutest, after all—but this was just sickening. The plethora of long gloves and folding fans unfit for a child under ten spoke to the sender's repulsive proclivities. But this sea of excess warmed my heart even more when I saw Elisa clinging to the product of my sorry finances. Most of the dolls cluttering the room had been tossed to the wayside without so much as being unwrapped, but the one in her arms was starting to fray from being squeezed tight every night.

I had used every ounce of Dexterity at my disposal to make her a stuffed bear so she wouldn't feel lonely at bedtime while I was away from the capital. It didn't quite live up to the teddy bears I'd once held, but I was proud of my work all the same; seeing my baby sister

cradle the patchwork of cloth and cotton so dearly filled my heart with joy.

“Elisa,” I cooed, “it’s morning.”

“Mmgh... Mr. Brother?”

I knew she would one day grow out of such toys, but it was enough that she appreciated it now. I just prayed that I could be her number one until the day that some dashing gentleman swept away her heart as a fine lady in her own right.

“Morning Mr. Brother...”

“Mhm, good morning, Elisa. I’m here, so let’s go get some breakfast.”

Although the palatial tongue was nearly second nature to her now, Elisa’s speech always crumbled when she was half-asleep. I gently rocked her shoulder, and she looped her hands around my neck. I scooped her up out of bed and helped her get ready for the day.

...Come to think of it, I wondered who had taken care of her while I’d been away. It couldn’t have been Lady Agrippina, could it?

Elisa was slowly learning how to do things for herself, but I had yet to teach her how to set tables. I didn’t notice any food stains upon returning, so it had all evidently gone smoothly, but trying to imagine the one and only Lady Agrippina of all people taking care of another... *Brr*. The thought sent chills down my spine.

I managed to peel off my sister-sized prickly burr and sat her down for breakfast. This was where I would have once been dismissed for a period of free activity, but my schedule had changed ever since I’d come back: Elisa was acting spoiled again.

How was a brother supposed to say no when his little sister’s eyes welled with tears and she sniffed, “You won’t get hurt again, will you?” I was sure the only reason I’d been permitted to sit in on her morning lectures was because the madam had grown weary of dealing with her outbursts. Lady Agrippina knew that leaving Elisa’s mental care to me was the path of least resistance.

So I stuck around until noon and watched over two lectures, on the palatial tongue and etiquette respectively. These turned out to be much more thorough than I’d imagined: the material was considerably more advanced than the speeches the local children had given to thank the magistrate at the end of their schooling back home. Elisa was learning poetry: she wove together rhymes, pulled from historical motifs, and counted the strokes of her brush as she delved into linguistic territory that I had never trodden. I’d read my fair share of poems, to be sure, but like the one Sir Feige and I had discussed, those had all been ametrical pieces aimed at the unlearned. I didn’t know anything about composition.

Lady Agrippina was a ceaseless font of critique, but wasn't our little girl incredible for composing her own poems? I'm sure you'll agree that she was at *least* a genius like no other.

Her palatial dialect was also distinct from the lower-class pronunciations I used; she was studying an accent meant for the members of the upper strata. The intonation was difficult to get right, especially when it came to the nasal sounds that didn't appear anywhere else, so I was floored when I heard her form fluid sentences.

Even more amazingly, our master said that she was only a few perfected topics away from being ready to attend College lectures as a registered student. Elisa had grown up so much in the time I'd been away.

This jubilation carried me into midday, where the biggest meal of the day awaited. Lamb stew was a rarity as the main dish, but the copious use of spices drove home the point that this was fit to grace an affluent table; it even came with dessert that was sure to improve Elisa's spirits. Thinking about how much the full course cost never failed to frighten me out of my wits.

"You may have some too, Dear Brother!"

"Thank you, Elisa. But make sure to clean your own plate first, okay?"

My little sister had no idea that my smile was just a front to hide cold sweat as my mind raced to put a price to the Western Krantz Cake on her plate. Lady Agrippina was kind enough to foot the bill on account of the food being ordered to suit her tastes, but my working-class mind couldn't help but wander to the thought of paying for it myself, even though I knew for a fact that my employer didn't care enough about money to pinch me for pennies.

No matter how much of a tantrum she threw, neither Elisa nor I could eat with her on my lap, so I pecked her on the forehead and coaxed her to hop off. Pushing away my teary-eyed sister was akin to mincing my soul with a Blade Cuisinart...but I knew that there was more to love than spoon-feeding her like a hapless kitten, and told myself as much over and over in hopes of reconditioning myself.

"Ah," Lady Agrippina said with a wave, "I'd nearly forgotten."

I made the rounds to clean up some more chores, and the madam stopped me when I passed by her hammock. I didn't quite comprehend the need to pass me her note as an origami butterfly when I was within arm's reach, but I supposed that was just her style.

"That's the reservation you asked for. It's under my name, so if anyone asks, you're there carrying out an experimental errand."

"Does 'experimental errand' even mean anything?"

The paper in my hands was a ticket into the College's testing facilities. For an institution committed to plumbing the depths of

theory, the magia here were not satisfied with achievements bound to hypotheticals; naturally, there were several different testing grounds to observe the effects of new research. Sorcery and danger were two peas in a pod, and environmental factors could drastically alter a spell's effect and throughput. An attempt to grope for the ideal circumstances for newly developed magic necessitated more than an average personal workshop.

These containment rooms had been the College's solution to this issue. Some were simple spaces made preposterously large to keep all effects localized; others were equipped with specialized apparatus to replicate precise conditions over multiple trials; and others still were built sturdy enough to withstand the sorts of brash trials that would endanger a researcher in their own atelier.

Considering how these personal laboratories were already isolated from society, it went without saying that the potentially weapons-grade experiments held in the larger installations posed a serious risk. No one wanted to leave this liability in the backyard of the imperial palace, here at the heart of Rhinian affairs. That said, the government couldn't exactly let magia wipe away random swaths of countryside every time they screwed up, especially when some of the more extreme cases involved straight-up biohazards. In the end, the crown had been predestined to pay a premium for enough boxes on a sufficient scale to contain nearly any threat.

Naturally, my purpose in going to such a location was to try out a new combo that I'd been mulling over. I'd figured it might be a bit irresponsible to test my theory in the woods or something, so I'd asked Mika for some advice, at which point he'd told me about the facilities. It went without saying that a mere servant couldn't reserve a room, so I'd asked Lady Agrippina to do so in my stead.

With how strictly I assumed the College guarded its private grounds, it must have been a serious challenge to get this permission in the short handful of days the madam had taken. Her reputation with those from other factions was terrible, let alone among the Leizniz loyalists, so I was always amazed at how she managed to throw around her political weight. Not that I wanted to know her secrets, of course. I knew not to poke my head in where there was trouble, and I was willing to shake hands without any questions so long as things were smooth sailing.

"Just tell the elevator where to go, as per usual," the madam explained. "Keep in mind that I could only manage to find a shared suite geared toward students, with how packed the testing facilities are at this time of year. Make sure not to do anything too grand."

Who did this witch think I was? I knew how to keep myself in line. Besides, my spell wasn't so mind-bogglingly powerful that I'd

need to hold back just because I had a few neighbors. It was just an extension of the flash-bang magic I'd come up with: cheap, efficient, and modest, but impactful.

"Worry not, madam. I am well aware of my place."

"Really?"

I totally ignored her drawn-out remark and broke free from Elisa's pleading stares to put the Stahl laboratory behind me.

[Tips] The College's testing areas have been built even deeper into the bedrock than its underground workshops. The shallowest rooms are small and unimpressive, but the largest spaces extend to the ends of the horizon.

They are segregated into their own worlds by conceptual barriers of peerless make; many generations ago, the sitting emperor had invested over half of the imperial treasury and just as much of his own dignity to bring these safeguards into existence. This implied, of course, that until then, College magia had whimsically conducted their practical research wherever they pleased.

The most confidential, top secret testing center lies at an abyssal depth equal to the most highly restricted parts of the College library. Despite its top-tier security, the records show that unfathomably powerful attack magicks broke all restraints from the inside out on three separate occasions; each left its mark on history as a disaster of cataclysmic proportions.

The sight before my eyes was so irrepressibly familiar to me that an institution absent in this universe floated to the forefront of my mind—a phenomenon that I found most peculiar.

The records of memory rotted far more quickly than those inscribed in parchment or stone. Even the most vivid episodes were sure to fade from someone's mind after a century, and most mental matters eroded in far less time; how could I ever hope to cling to perfect recollections of a world no longer my own? Introduced to time's whetstone, my memory was slowly becoming a speckled mess of accounts drained of their color. My closest friends and even my family were fizzling away, their names and faces reduced to shapeless ideas in my mind. Coworkers that I hadn't been particularly close to were even worse, despite having seen them every day of my life.

The sights and layout of the city I lived in—and of my *own room*—could only be dragged up in vague terms. On my worst days, it took me serious effort just to remember my own name. That was how immersed I'd become in a world that only knew me as Erich of Konigstuhl canton. Yet there remained an inexplicable through line:

the fantastic delusions I'd seen unfold at the game table clung to the core of my being. For the most unique, memorable tales, I could name every single PC by heart—though I could only remember the people who'd played them by nebulous physical attributes and playstyle at best—and retell the whole story to this day.

For example, one of my favorites was the time our PCs had proposed to the dragon we'd been tasked to slay, forcing our befuddled GM to retrofit the story into a Princess Kaguya-esque tale. Where we'd planned for a lengthy session complete with a time trial gimmick to use the lingering vestiges of the dragon's seal against her, a critical round of negotiation (better known as flirting) got us past the ancient beast's cryptic riddle and caused the whole aim of the story to shift: our new goal became to prop up the unpopular PC as a man's man. Who could have seen that coming?

After a great deal of fuss, we finally convinced our heroic buffoon to smooth-talk the dragon, and his dice successfully pierced the final boss's heart. Preoccupied with the sweet and the sour of newly married life, the dragon gave up on her plans to ruin all of humanity; we'd saved the day.

At some point, the GM had gotten so into the whole thing that he converted her into a klutzy draconic babe who wielded unfathomable power but was super weak to chutzpah; watching our friend lose himself hard enough to boldly lay his fetishes bare left us all crumpled on the floor, clutching at our aching sides for minutes on end.

To make a short story of a long one, memories tied to powerful, deep-seated emotion had yet to fade in thirteen years of physical life and eight years of mental life. But there was another type of memory that lingered just as long: impersonal, technical concepts, like the one I felt upon seeing this testing facility. Fitting, considering how my reason for being at what I could only describe as a *firing range* had been purely technical to begin with.

The space was partitioned off into innumerable narrow segments. The skinny rectangular boxes were designed to test spells and arcane tools that fired in straight lines and at a distance, with a target at the far end and the controls for said target near the entrance. Each hallway was isolated by walls on every side, and the doors leading in prevented outsiders from peeking. The design served the dual purpose of containing dangerous spells and keeping secrets from slipping out.

All one could glean from the outside was whether or not the room was in use based on the plaque on the door. I expected no less from this den of radical invention: when even lowly students could be rewarded with immediate promotion for progressive breakthroughs, deterring plagiarism was a top priority.

Though I couldn't see or hear the experiments being held, the

overwhelming number of filled booths spoke to an ardor that permeated the air. At this very moment, countless students were putting their ingenuity and doctrine to the test.

Specifically, the fervor here was fueled by the approaching technical showcase. Basically, College affiliates unveiled their latest and greatest to put on a show every new year; anything that caught a professor's eye could expect to see backing, so ambitious students were desperate to stand out from the crowd. Or at least, that was what Mika had told me.

You may then ask if he, too, was funneling his blood, sweat, and tears into creating something worthy of the competition, but the answer was no, not really. He was still busy dying on the mountain of projects and essays he'd missed during our trip, to the point where I'd barely seen him at all these past few days. In any case, he already had a direct mentor, so he didn't need to puff himself up for random professors and researchers. He didn't have a particular pet project to fund either, so there was no reason to push himself.

Enrolling as a College student was precarious business. One didn't *need* a master to attend, per se, but it was plain to see that learning directly from a celebrated scholar was a much shorter path to achieving one's goals. I'd heard that some managed to rise to the rank of researcher without a supervising mentor, but these stubborn geniuses were rare exceptions to the rule.

Thus, many were the students in search of a capable advisor. Even those who already had their own masters saw this as an opportunity to attract more renowned professors, and the most driven honed their research with frantic vigor. Like salmon climbing rapid falls, the school flocked to fertile grounds.

To that end, I was incredibly blessed to have two academically outstanding—I refused to give thought to their nonacademic qualities—magia taking time out of their days to teach me. Though of course, anyone feeling envious was free to take my place.

I risked being seen as a spy scoping out the competition if I stood here any longer, so I decided to hurry along to my booth. All these hard workers were most certainly on edge at the thought of someone stealing their glory, making this hall more dangerous than a back alley in a run-down city.

...Hm? That gentleman doesn't look like he belongs.

I spotted a dashing fellow leaning against the wall before I ducked into the reserved room. His looks were enough to make the finest flower blush, more handsome than the moon itself. Somewhere on the younger end of his midtwenties, the man seemed high-strung but noble in quality; his platinum hair was parted a little over two-thirds of the way to his right, and the pragmatic wit he exuded bordered on

coldheartedness. Combined with his pallor, the man could have defined a generation of films as a movie star specializing in villainous roles. While his bluish-violet robe immediately announced his authority, his tall, well-built silhouette would have done well in the carbon-black spy suits of secret agent flicks.

Yet in spite of all his outward beauty, there was one element that drew attention like no other: the silver gleam that sat in the back of his deep-seated eyes.

Walking around the melting pot that was Berylin, one could expect to see a whole rainbow of irises, but this was the first time I'd ever seen silver. The finest smith in all the land could spend a lifetime polishing an ingot, and the man's gems would still outshine its luster; if he told me they were truly made of pure metal, I would believe him without hesitation. They were so stunning that to gaze into them directly would surely stop one's heart for seconds at a time.

Man... I sure have run into a lot of inhumanly gorgeous people since coming to the College.

I would have liked to continue appreciating his good looks, but I wasn't about to let myself get in trouble for ogling someone so obviously aristocratic, so I slipped into my lane. He was probably here to scout for new talent: a student's accomplishments reflected well on their master, so it was no wonder a gentleman interested in taking on apprentices would be here to observe.

...Wait a second. He couldn't see anything from the hallway, so that didn't make any sense. *I wonder what he's here for, then?*

As fun as it was to speculate, my time here was limited. The baseless supposition could wait for later.

The interior was totally isolated by walls, matching up with what I'd seen from the outside. I knew from the plaques that both neighboring rooms were in use right now, but I couldn't feel a thing. If I focused all my efforts on sensing the flow of mana, I could only barely make out that *something* was happening on the other side of the wall—that was how private these booths were.

Oh, of course. No matter how many physical and magical barriers were set up, the most skilled magia would pick up on the faint traces of mana left behind. The gentleman in the hall could easily wait around for a whiff of something interesting and catch a glimpse of the caster whenever they left their room.

Still, at my level, it was practically impossible to sniff out what was happening behind closed doors...which meant I was free to let loose!

I pulled out the goods and got to setting everything up right away. I had a few pipes that resembled pointed throwing clubs or maybe oversized darts that I'd gotten from one of Lady Agrippina's

acquaintances at the capital's artisan union.

These were obviously thrown weapons, but as one might suspect, my scheming didn't end there. I wasn't going to pay this overdone testing range a visit just because I discovered throwables. These iron tubes were actually catalysts, and their hollow insides could be stuffed with arcane reagents.

Just to be safe, I took everything apart and checked for issues before conducting my trial. I unscrewed the cap and pulled out a single cartridge of the substances I'd expected to see.

"Nice," I mumbled to no one in particular, resealing the lid.

The casing was the same as what I used to produce flash-bangs, but the dolomite inside had been swapped out for a pinch of flame retardant I'd tweaked with magic. And while something that resisted fire might sound difficult to come by, I'd been able to purchase it for no more than a piece of candy at a nearby hardware store.

The initial steps in this multi-spell process had already been completed. Using the alchemy set Lady Agrippina had retrieved from the lakeside manor, I'd extracted and purified a certain compound from the flame retardant with mutative sorcery and increased its volume with a touch of manifestation.

On the inside of the tube, I'd lined the walls with rituals written in my own blood. My ability to wiggle into spaces no real appendage could enter and deftly scribble with all the precision of a rice artist showed the true might of my dexterous Hands.

I had an iron pipe and a chemical hidden inside; all I had to do now was change the makeup of both at the same time. Like I'd mentioned, this was the exact same process as my magical flash-bang. But make no mistake: I had good reason for dishing out the cash for a *mold* to cast my own pipes from.

Moving my Hands was nearly second nature by this point, and I extended my invisible arm as fast as I could after picking up the throwing stick. I'd invested a lot of points in a new Feather Fingers add-on which let my hands stretch out at speeds never before seen.

The metal rod zoomed forth faster than a flying arrow and jammed into the target hanging at the end of the hall; in an instant, the mana contained within triggered all of the prearranged spells. What little compound was in the cartridge magically migrated into the iron, forming a chemical reaction that would ordinarily necessitate a large-scale industrial plant. Meanwhile, the rod itself had plucked oxygen from the air, instantaneously rusting from its self-inflicted oxidization.

My mensch brain couldn't register the individual steps in real time, but each dutifully ran its course. As the two components became one, the final formula awakened from its slumber: a tiny, tiny spark.

The minuscule ember fizzled away before it could escape the confines of its metallic prison, but its heat quickly spread through the interior, and—

“Whoa?!”

It exploded so violently that I reflexively covered my face. The flash had been blinding; I may have been a split second late with my barrier, but the scorching waves of heat were unbearable even with it up. The metal target hanging from the ceiling had melted away within fractions of the first second.

“Holy...”

Faced with awesome destruction that surpassed my every calculation, a whimper escaped my lips. I could hear my neighbors muttering in the wake of my burst of light and heat, but that wasn’t my fault, was it? This was what this place was for, right?

Fine, I confess: I’d made thermite.

The alum used to fireproof stuff had aluminum in it—though not even close to as much as one could mine from bauxite—which I’d separated out. I combined my pure extract with extra waste metal, alchemically converting the whole thing to aluminum and increasing my supply. Mixed with iron oxide and excited with a spark, the reduction produced four thousand degrees of heat in an instant.

Four thousand degrees. The melting point of pretty much every substance in this world was well below that. Very few things could withstand that kind of heat, and on Earth, the reaction had been used for welding metals together—when it didn’t see use as an incendiary bomb.

Magic could be used to totally liquefy metals, so melting them wasn’t anything new, but such techniques could only be performed by an experienced magus confident in both their capacity and output. If I wanted to do something like that, it would take me a depressing amount of training. However, I’d already developed a batch of cantrips that could be used to disable my foes. I’d figured that if I put my brain to task and made good use of alchemical ingredients, I could mimic the feats of legendary magia without all the strain; seeing my new combo in action, I’d been right.

A substance theoretically hot enough to melt most metals was likely to chew through mystic barriers too, to say nothing of common heat-resistance magic. Furthermore, unlike normal fires, this exothermic reduction didn’t stop for lack of oxygen and could continue when submerged in water. The only counterplay that remained was to use magic to locally cancel the phenomenon of burning itself. Even more obnoxiously, the oxidized aluminum would retain its heat for a while after the reaction completed, continuously scalding any enemy unlucky enough to have the molten metal stick.

I'd tweaked the bomb's directionality to fire forward from within the dart, so if it pierced someone's skin, this unethical addition would burn them from the inside out.

The world was full of stalwart beings, but I had yet to hear of an organism whose innards were as impervious as outer armor. Although many races boasted lightning-fast regenerative powers, I doubted they could heal themselves while boiling metal braised their organs.

It was simple, cheap, powerful, and hard to counter. When first coming up with the idea, I'd done a little dance of excitement at the thought of having a way to deal with unkillable monsters, but...

"Holy shit, this is horrifying."

A target probably made from some fancy alloy designed to endure the abuse of constant attack magic had melted in an instant. The molten remains joined the thermite as it dripped to the ground, not forming a puddle, but a *hole* as it chewed through the floor.

Forget people, this was absolutely not okay to use on *any* living being—they'd dissolve without a trace. That, and the side effects of sweltering heat and the ultraviolet flash that hit me all the way back here needed to go. Letting this blow in close quarters would cook me and my allies just as much as any enemy.

I mean, polemurgy as a whole had a lot of violent stuff—burning, freezing, shocking, and the like—but I felt like this was a bit...much. Borrowing the advancements of twentieth-century scientists looking for better ways of generating heat on Earth and applying literal magic to bend the rules of physics had left me with unhinged destructive power.

I wonder what'll happen if I scale everything up...

As I steeped in the awe of my results' depravity, I finally realized something: the floor was bubbling.

Oh shit! I'd completely forgotten about the Heat Retention spell—originally meant to keep food warm—I'd added in to extend the effects! I didn't know if there was a floor below me, but I was *not* about to get in trouble for making a hole in someone's ceiling. I sat there wondering what to do when neither water nor smothering would do me any good. At my wits' end, I ended up banishing it to the realm of elsewhere with space-bending magic; I averted the crisis, but earned myself a headache for the rest of the day doing so.

[Tips] While often referred to as a collective, the Imperial College's testing facilities are categorized into different grades based on their intended use and intended users. The entire bloc is sectioned off with the most powerful barriers available, but to use such technology to separate smaller sectors would necessitate an infinite budget.

There are departments for students, who are unlikely to cause any real damage; researchers and professors, who engage in risky undertakings; and total containment cells to prevent whatever happens inside from getting out at all costs, to name a few. Each is equipped with appropriate security measures, and as long as the users perform tasks within the anticipated bounds, the rooms are the pinnacle of experimental safety.

What I would give to hold that shimmering silver.

Such were the thoughts of those who gazed upon the monochrome gentleman, who himself watched a blond-haired, blue-faced boy flee a testing room. The man approached the door, secured with a cryptographic spell that would only respond to the formula scrawled on its corresponding reservation sheet, and effortlessly turned the knob—the lock had forgotten its purpose the instant he made contact.

“My,” he marveled.

What remained was the aftermath of an ignition much too strong to be the work of a novice mage: waves of hot air rushed to escape through the opened doorway, suggesting that the initial blast had been powerful enough to generate an atmospheric current.

The man neatly tucked his hair back after the gust settled and stepped inside to the overpowering stink of burning metal. He pinched his high-set nose and advanced to the source of the heat without hesitation.

“A *cantrip*.”

Oppressive heat had melted the masoned flooring: the stone showed signs of having boiled. Though the origin of the scorching blast hot enough to make midsummer winds resemble wintry gales had vanished, the deep hole remained feverish. To leave all this heat behind after the source had disappeared pointed to hedge magic; true magic unimaginatively used to heighten destructive power would not amount to this.

“Fueled by more than mere mana, I take it.”

The Imperial College had already worked out that while the absence of heat could be absolute, the reverse was untrue. They had done many experiments to work out statistical correlations between mana expenditure and heat production for both true and hedge magic: the results showed that the cost of melting metal was immense.

Yet the sturdy metal target imbued with shock-repellant magic had liquefied beyond recognition. So thorough was its destruction that he could only presume this to be the work of an entirely new cantrip. Even so, it had verifiably *not* been a spell of epic proportions: the trace mana was too meager. Only a handful of minor magic had been employed here. While the lack of evidence would be understandable if

someone had mystically concealed their work, he found it difficult to believe the panicking boy from earlier would have done so. The rest of the scene could hardly be called a cover-up.

“And not a drop of oil to be seen.”

The gentleman's nose twitched as if to sniff out the origin of this destructive mystery. His brow jumped at the pungent odor, but it helped confirm the absence of traditional catalysts. Fats and oils were widely employed for heat-based spells by mages to the point of tedium, and magia made efforts to avoid them and their traceable nature. No matter how severe a burn oil could produce, it was too recognizable: chief among its obnoxious quirks was how the air around the caster invariably grew thick with loathsome grease.

One could mask its use through careful manipulation and eliminate all but the desired effect, but the idiosyncrasies of oily catalysts could not evade detection. In the absence of any scattered flecks of oil or any hint of its scent, the silver gentleman eliminated the possibility of its use.

The searing heat would drive any other away, but he walked up to the smoking edge of the hole and peered in. All the moisture evaporated from his eyes, but he continued to stare in search of clues.

“These marks point to slow dissolution as opposed to instantaneous explosion. The heat remained constant, but gradually sank downward.”

Despite having nothing more than the shape of a cavity to work off of, the man's intellect and deep knowledge of sorcery let him explore countless possibilities. He surmised that some viscous liquid akin to molten iron had been used to trap an exorbitant amount of heat. If so, the lack of oil and the frightening speeds at which it had destroyed the flooring could easily be explained.

The only remaining point of mystery was that producing enough heat to melt metal and manipulating it once liquefied was a task too arduous for the young students that rented these smaller testing lanes. With his curiosity at its peak, the man took a moment to ponder, and then touched the scalding hot hole without a shred of hesitation.

“Hm.”

His skin burnt off in an instant; the heat vaporized his blood and cooked his flesh. The man showed no more discomfort than when he'd raised his brow at the scent of burning iron. He was purely analytical, gazing at his own mangled hand like it was an exotic insect preserved under pins and glass.



Where anyone else would have lamented the irreparable damage done to their one and only mortal shell, the gentleman let out an awestruck sigh. The searing pain of his melting flesh and the inconsolable sadness of losing part of himself failed to bother him; rather, he hadn't felt either in the first place.

"This heat rivals that of Great Work polemurgy."

If he were to feel anything, it would be the elation of discovering magic yet unknown to him, or the nostalgia of experiencing a similar effect to a spell he'd endured before. Although whatever he'd found had stopped quickly after chewing through his fingers, the heat it produced was similar to the hellfire the Empire employed when wiping entire battlefields clean. That purging flame required several polemurges working in tandem, and could only be deployed with the approval of the Emperor himself.

"Interesting. Its power surpasses that which the destruction suggests, and the melted stone flattens itself at the bottom of each crater in an act of concealment. The combination of atypical features points to an entirely new spell... *Most* interesting."

Turning on his heel, the man reached into his breast pocket. His hand reemerged, pinching a fresh glove for his pristine, uninjured digits.

"Shall I investigate? Ah, but how boorish that would be... Anyone coming here is nigh guaranteed to be polishing their work for the showcase."

The odds were good that someone going out of their way to borrow a practice room in this season was putting the finishing touches on their exhibition for the New Year's gala. Every year, some budding prodigy or another brought something that truly wowed the gentleman, and he looked forward to untying his purse in support of these inventive minds more than anybody else.

This year's event was sure to be spectacular. Better not to go poking about for the culprit's name and face, the silver magus reasoned, if he wanted to avoid spoiling his excitement. The privacy afforded to those using these rooms meant nothing in the face of his authority, but such privileges were to go unused today.

Surprises were always best untainted. No matter how long life dragged on, a reveal could only ever come once.

"Every visit to Berylin is so rife with bother, but I suppose good things do happen. Ah, the vigor of youth is such a wonderful thing to behold."

With a slight bounce in his step, the gentleman decided to clean up the work he had been so unenthused to do only a moment ago: on he went to the imperial palace.

[Tips] Great Work sorcery—also known as ceremonial magic or grand magecraft—requires multiple mages, a massive arcane circle, countless catalysts, or an incredibly drawn-out incantation. The process arose from the mind-boggling difficulty of casting an unfathomably powerful spell at a ludicrous distance.

However, the necessity of exhaustive preparations, fine mystic control, and perfectly synchronized teamwork makes the craft accessible only to the most skilled magia, and even then only to those that have dedicated years of single-minded practice to the art.

I learned the painful lesson that a normal scolding is far less painful than sardonic mockery.

Kneeling on the floor as the scum of the earth merrily strolled around me for thirty odd minutes, singing, “Are you even *aware* of where it is you stand?” had me on the brink of sobbing. But if she was willing to pay the repair fees and cover my ass on the bureaucratic end in exchange, I would take that deal every time: pride was cheap—especially mine.

I was *this* close to snapping back that it was the facility’s fault for breaking under the stress of a half-baked mage’s inexperienced attempt at ingenuity, but I couldn’t bring myself to do so when I thought back to how smug I’d been when I’d left. Now that I knew an offhand comment could lead to me holding back tears, I swore to watch my mouth in the future.

But considering how Elisa came to my rescue and said, “I’ll get really mad if you keep bullying my dear brother!” I think the overall experience was a net positive. Seeing her step between us and glare back at her own master was like having an angel protect me in the flesh. The way her hair began to float from her overflowing mana was a teensy bit terrifying, but she was an angel all the same.

Faced with her darling disciple’s emotional and magical growth, I’m sure the tenderhearted master had no choice but to cede her incessant barrage of ridicule. But at the end of all of her derision, her final comment was, “Dear me, what a nifty little thing you’ve created.” I couldn’t bring myself to completely hate the madam when she offered morsels of fist-pump-worthy praise like this.

Freed, I began to clean up Elisa’s room. I worked every Hand in parallel to put away scattered notes and half-read books—I always reminded her to keep everything in order, but sadly it seemed she was taking after her mentor—and was in the middle of Cleaning every nook and cranny when Elisa called out to me. I looked back at the

canopy bed to see her wearing a new set of pajamas I hadn't ever seen before.

Again, you pervert?

Several layers of thin silk had been laminated into a piece of nightwear that could buy Heinz and Miss Mina's cottage—obviously the work of the wraith toeing the tightrope of criminality. I could just barely hold back my disgust, since it wasn't at all transparent, but I seriously wondered what kind of horrific death one would need to experience in order to revive with inclinations this dire. Cute clothes were one thing, but to squeal over a girl's *pajamas* was positively ill. And what was with her fixation on gloves and socks, anyway?!

"Dear Brother?"

"Hm? What is it, Elisa?"

Yet our little girl was so incredibly charming that she could pull off the most deranged gifts from an utter creep. She had a giant tome full of homework cradled in both arms and rocked her legs back and forth with a puzzled expression.

"Dear Brother, why did you make such scary magic?"

Her tilted head and pure gaze were adorable enough to shatter my heart. *I knew our family had an angel on our hands.* Unfortunately, the cherub's question also made my chest tighten up in a completely different way.

"I'm curious," she said. "Why, oh why, do you *choose* to do scary things, Dear Brother?"

Innocent naivete slid into my ear in the shape of refined palatial speech, permeating my psyche. I'd begun developing new weapons solely for the abstract goal of adventure, and the tiny droplet of doubt she introduced now threatened to melt away the supposed righteousness of my goal.

Elisa's question was genuine, and her heartfelt concern made it all the more difficult for me to answer. In a different light, I had set out on this path for no other reason than simple admiration that had taken hold of me a lifetime ago. I didn't have a serious duty to fulfill, nor had the gods entrusted me with a prophecy to bring about.

The future Buddha had blessed me with the power to indulge in all that I willed, and that very will had been the starting point of my journey.

This path was one of merciless bloodshed, devoid of neat delineations between good and evil. I was no fairy-tale hero, predestined to bring justice to the world: my enemies were not restricted to irredeemable villains whom I could slay with a Happily Ever After.

Such lessons had long been carved into my soul. Every day, the icy shimmer on my left hand reminded me of she whom I had failed to

save. To choose violence was to choose a path with fewer smiles and more pain. It was to actively distance myself from the merry ends of heroic fables.

Countless quests took murder to be a given, and many were so corrupt that accepting the job was a sin in and of itself. The tried-and-true act of hunting down bandits kept someone, somewhere, sometime in the future safe, but still required blood to be spilled in the present. Boiled down, defending a village besieged by raiders and sifting for treasure in a labyrinth were the same: they ultimately came down to transactions of life and death.

I scoured every reach of my mind to find a logical explanation to why I'd willingly subject myself to a career wherein the reaper was my closest companion...but my sluggish brain could not squeeze out a valid response.

"I know you're very strong, Dear Brother. I know you protected me from bad people..." Elisa stared at me. "But I can't help but think you're actively seeking out danger."

Her words were a mallet slamming into my skull; I nearly lost my balance from sheer dizziness.

"At the mansion in the woods, I think Master would have done something if you hadn't stepped forward. Master is very strong and very wealthy. I'm sure she could have done something." I could say nothing as she continued, "And this past winter, I don't think you had to force yourself on such a terrible journey. If you hadn't, wouldn't Master have just purchased the book and tidied everything up?"

Elisa's logic was airtight. I may have had good reason for internally referring to Lady Agrippina as a scoundrel—she was willing to toy with the lives of others for her own amusement, going so far as to laugh off a lifelong grudge so long as it proved entertaining—but even so, the madam was not the type to force me into something so long as I refused with all my might.

She loaned me to Lady Leizniz, but had gone no further on account of my personal refusal. Had she truly wanted to milk me for everything I was worth, she could have let go of the reins and handed me off to the wraith as an honorary student. I would have been a massive bargaining chip, and with Elisa trapped by her side, she could've tapped into me as a never-ending faucet of intel on the dean. As far as bargains went, this would've been grazing the upper bound for what one could buy with the life of one forgettable farm boy.

Lady Agrippina had elected *not* to take this deal. She put in a cruel word at every turn, mocked me for my shortcomings to my face, and threw unreasonable tasks my way, but not once had she forced something onto me that she knew I wouldn't accept, despite it being clear that her bank and clout made imposing her will a trivial task.

In which case, there was clearly only one reason left for me to dive headfirst into the battlefield: my own will. I couldn't deny that Lady Agrippina could and would have solved every issue in my stead. Looking back, there had to have been a better way to pacify Helga; at the very least, the madam would not have let her run off like I had. The ichor maze incident wouldn't have even come up had I not tried to get clever, but if I'd refused Sir Feige's proposal on grounds of undue danger, he most definitely would have acquiesced—as disappointed as I'm sure he would have been.

My happiness was the product of hindsight. I happened to have been fortunate enough to trade Helga's life to preserve my own; Mika and I had just been lucky to get home without dying. This streak of serendipity was the product of my own skill, but the perils I'd so narrowly avoided were not, strictly speaking, necessary.

The great rewards they heralded were not in vain, of course: though it pained me too much to think of Helga's memory as "loot," the treasures that accompanied my dungeon-delving adventure reduced the total time I would spend in servitude. To me, that was a wonderful bounty.

However, the same could not be said for Elisa. If I had made a single error—no, even if I hadn't—in any of these encounters, the dice could have told the tale of a boy who fell in battle. My sister was asking me if all the prizes I'd won were worth this risk.

The only fight thus far that had been truly unavoidable had been the one against Elisa's kidnappers—and even then, there had been the possibility of Lady Agrippina's stopping by on a whim if she'd sensed something peculiar afoot. On the most fundamental level, everything else had been my own doing.

If I'd asked the madam for help like a normal child during her afternoon meal, I wouldn't have been sent off to the lakeside manor. If I hadn't tried to squeeze out a bonus reward from living up to Sir Feige's expectations, I wouldn't have been comatose in bed until wintertime.

"Why didn't you choose to stay and learn with me in the capital?" Elisa asked. "I know it's expensive, but I'll do my best too! I'll hurry up and become a student, and then a researcher—I'll make enough to pay for your classes too. Besides, you can still make money here in Berylin...just like you've been doing."

I had nothing to say in response. She was completely right: I'd spent my spare time cleaning requests off the College's bulletin board, and the pay was significantly better than anything I could make as a lowly worker in the city. Lady Agrippina was also far from difficult to part from her coins, and my current wage for household chores had boggled my mind when I'd first seen it.

Not to mention the most important part: the madam had not included any mention of interest or deadlines for Elisa's student loans. This was an unprecedented act of altruism on her part. No matter how little interest she showed in monetary affairs, anyone else would have included some form of interest, if only to keep up appearances. In a setting without commercial regulation and fixed rates, she could have used her patrician powers to force us into a contract of twenty or thirty percent accruing *daily*.

Yet she'd elected to forgo any such usury. She saw us solely as a means to prop up her preferred mode of living, and had loaned us capital in service of that goal.

In fact, I could totally see her handing Elisa a casual "graduation gift" on the day she became a researcher that matched whatever debt remained. It seemed much more like her to avoid the bothersome calculations of what had been paid and what was yet owed as soon as she was past the need to adhere to official College rules.

Still, we had no need to cling to Lady Agrippina's benevolence: a fixed sum that never grew could always be repaid through honest work. Once Elisa won her rights back as a magus and began receiving stipends from the government, the debt would settle itself without her actively trying—her future salary was going to make us look like fools for crying over a measly ten drachmae here or a year's worth of tuition there.

"So, Dear Brother...won't you stop? Please?"

At this point, my justifications felt paper-thin. She had done more than blow them away; she'd made them vanish without a trace. For better or for worse, my call to adventure had been a tenuous affair. I was no better than the Lv1 Fighter setting out from his hometown in the boonies after listening to one too many heroic sagas...but the true nature of battle was not so flimsy.

Now I faced questions that shook my very core: Why did my magic have to be scary? Why did I have to fight?

The fervor that had gripped me when the ichor maze had dissipated burned as brightly as ever, and the world of tabletop games shined with the same vivid colors it always had. My earring jingled in the windless room; I didn't need its reminder to relive the oath I'd made on that twilit hill. All these questions represented was a splash of darkness accentuating the picturesque depiction of adventure in my mind.

"I'll do my very best," Elisa pleaded, "so won't you stay here with me forever?"

Yet the pigment of those shadowy streaks was rich enough to sow the seeds of doubt. *Do you have enough reason to abandon a peaceful life?* it asked. *Can you cut off your worrying sister to dive into the lion's*

jaws? Is that what you call morality?

“...But you know, Elisa,” I said, “the world is full of bad people. That’s why we need a little bit of scary magic: just so that they can’t hurt us. I think I’d die of sadness if anything happened to you.”

I could do no better than evade these interrogations. I didn’t want to break my own pledge and abandon my dreams, but I couldn’t deny my sister’s compelling argument, especially knowing she was saying this for my own sake. When two antithetical ideas are both right, finding the correct answer becomes a Herculean task.

Oh, I realized, maybe there is no correct answer.

I had literally fought to untangle exactly this sort of knotty existential question to the grave as the cancer ate away at me, so I think I was fit to say this with confidence: no amount of contemplation would ever produce a satisfactory answer. The only thing that awaited me was the spiritual pain of mental fatigue. At the end of much deliberation, I’d chosen to see my ceaseless pain through with a peaceful finale. Yet as the curtains closed, I shuddered in bed and wondered to myself: *I know I can’t win—the numbers show it. But if I had fought on...how much longer would I have lived?*

That was why I had turned to meditation. It had been my only escape from the pain that overrode my mind.

“Hrm... To stop bad people...”

Elisa mumbled to herself with the inquisitive glimmer of a fledgling magus. I reflexively shook my head. I couldn’t understand why she was pondering this so deeply, like a cartoon hero trying to overcome the antagonist’s psychological tricks—this topic wasn’t going to make anyone any happier.

“So,” she asked, “is it all for me?”

“...That’s right,” I said. “For you. If I die, I won’t be able to protect you until you’re all grown up. The world has more bad people than you think, Elisa. That’s why I want to be stronger than all of them.”

Not to make excuses, but bloody conflict was shockingly easy to stumble upon in this world. An honest merchant could meet their end when a marauder plundered their house, and kidnapping was obviously a threat, considering how Elisa had already been targeted twice.

The world needed combatants, no matter how shallow their cause.

Shaking off the uncertainty in my heart, I finished cleaning the room and laid my sister in bed, her brow still as furrowed as ever.

[Tips] The Adventurer’s Association once conducted a survey to see why their members chose the career that they did. The third-most-cited reason was the love of heroic sagas, shared by one-fifth of the participants. In second place, one-fourth

answered that this was the only path they had. At thirty-eight percent, the most popular response was fame and fortune.

Such is life. Work is usually allotted with no more ado than rolling a set of dice, and at times, the lives of men are lighter in the pocket than a coin minted with silver.

To the methuselah, the other races—that is to say, mortals—seemed to rush through maturation. For a creature that could live without food or drink in a shelter no better than a roof and walls, the urgency required to worry about matters of today and tomorrow seemed awfully antsy.

Agrippina was one such methuselah, who had begun to accustom herself to this foreign pace of life as of late. She chuckled internally, thinking, *How convenient it is to have a spur nearby.*

“Master.”

“Yes?”

Making full use of her multithreaded capabilities, she’d been scribbling a luminous trail of elegant cursive in empty space, all while reading the book in her hands. Poetic euphemisms were rarely employed amongst magia, but the gentry of this land were so averse to clearly labeled promises that to teach her student the language of letters was unavoidable.

Finished with her necessary but tiresome work, the child placed down an eagle quill too large for her hands and stared at her master. The magus caught a glimpse of her disciple’s expression out of the corner of her eye and closed her book: whatever the girl wanted to say, it was clearly not a question about her homework.

As depraved and self-centered as Agrippina was, she commanded enough good sense to put in diligent effort for the sake of protecting her prized leisure. If her apprentice wished for serious advice, she concluded that putting this riveting story on pause to hear her out was for the best.

Elisa’s mental state had recently leapt forward again, ushering in a great deal of academic progress: her command of the written word was now beyond that of her brother. The methuselah had an inkling as to what had spurred on this breakthrough, and thus also had a solid read on what her disciple was going to say.

“When will I be able to begin learning magic?” Elisa asked.

A fine question. Not the question itself, mind you—Agrippina fancied the implication that lay behind it.

Study words to keep your brother close; learn magic to shoo alfar away; gain strength to protect him. Such were the wicked whispers the villain used to fan the flames of her student’s determination. Her ever-servile spur had been vital in inducing the girl’s belated mental

development, and it seemed that another set of gears had clicked into place in her mind.

Agrippina knew not what her apprentice and servant spoke about behind closed doors; she wasn't fond enough of gossip to consider eavesdropping worthy of her time. Still, she could guess what this spoiled sister would beg of the brother she so adored.

As Elisa's mind caught up to her body, she had learned the behavior of thought. With this advancement came the loss of dependence—not in conduct, but rather in the invisible realm of the soul. On the surface, she remained the tiny baby clinging to her brother's side...but her true colors were beginning to soak in: a shade of monomania, a tinge of fixation, and the unmistakable hue of an alf.

"Let me see," Agrippina said. "I shall take you someplace nice in due time as a measure of your manners. If you manage to play the part of a proper young lady then, I will consider beginning lessons in magecraft."

A changeling only eight years of age was still a changeling. The base psyche trapped in her brain was not that of a mensch, and once her alfish side roused from its slumber, she would quickly come into her true form. The evidence was palpable: to learn all that she had of writing and speech in a single summer would be grounds to dub any other child a genius.

Fairies were living phenomena; the flesh could pull as hard as it pleased, but these innate desires were too strong a magnet for the ego to resist.

Agrippina thought this very apt for a girl who had begun her studies to protect her brother from meddlesome alfar. She considered Elisa's single-minded motivation adorably pathetic and wondered what her servant would think if he were ever to discover the truth.

"When will that be?" Elisa pressed.

"Well...I suppose if I were to make a reservation now, it would be sometime within the month."

The methuselah inspected her disciple's resolute expression and let out a quiet chuckle. But make no mistake: this was not the loving smile of a mature adult cheering on their mentee through the nervousness of a practical exam. No, it was the sick, twisted sneer of a woman gazing at a live bomb, imagining what kind of fantastical explosions waited at the end of the fuse.

Now then, Agrippina mused, I wonder what sort of alf this little changeling came from?

The magus had come up with a highly probable hypothesis with her wealth of knowledge, and it seemed that the opportunity to confirm her theory was not too far away—in the mensch sense of the phrase, even.

“But isn’t this a bit sudden?” Agrippina asked. “Are you that interested in the grand spell your brother developed?”

“No...” Elisa shook her head. “My dear brother told me that there are a lot of bad people in the world, and that’s why he must fight—to protect me. That’s why he pushes himself so hard.”

The evildoers she spoke of were hardly uncommon. The authorities’ capability to search their vast territories was simply unfit to catch them all; when one hopped border was all it took to turn a criminal back into a law-abiding citizen, violence was a profitable venture. Of course, local churches kept records of wanted fugitives in their family registries, but the inability to validate one’s identity only mattered for those seeking honest work.

Thus the state employed the cruelest of punishments to enforce order. Thieves were collared and chained, murderers were decapitated, and bandits were hanged up high. Yet no amount of severed heads could cull the seeds of evil.

Upon witnessing the execution of a bandit who’d attacked a tax caravan, the great prose poet Bernkastel once sang, “Count the grains of blooming wheat and you may numerate them yet, but these heads shall only end with the history they darken.”

Filled with more resignation than irony, the verse spoke to the infinite stupidity of sentient life. Man’s eternal quest for power was to defend against it, and it was for safety’s sake that the weak accepted rule by others.

“But if I get stronger—so strong that I can protect him from anything—then my dear brother won’t have to do anything dangerous again, will he?”

A will of tremendous gravity gleamed in Elisa’s amber eyes—no, perhaps this was a trick of the light, but they glowed the faint gold of moonlight. She tilted her head and gracefully covered her lips, just as Agrippina had taught her. To smile with childish charm was part of a young noble’s duties, but this was anything but cute.

“And when that happens,” the changeling continued, “I don’t even think he’ll need to leave the house. He’ll always be by my side, and we can play and have fun and be happy forever... Am I wrong, Master?”

The brother was mensch folly incarnate: he longed for fleeting moments of euphoric glory. Now the sister was following suit, dyeing herself in the folly of fey; how did she differ from the eternal dancers of the twilight hill?

She was still so young, but the ripening process had advanced beyond recall. Seeing her disciple this way, Agrippina had to suppress a roar of laughter to speak.

“No, you’re not wrong in the slightest. I think you’re perfectly sound, so long as you become stronger than everyone in the whole

wide world, *including* your brother.”

Methuselah lived incomparably longer and thought incomparably faster than mensch, but they too lived and breathed in their own form of folly. Their irrationality was that of a grown woman smacking a sleeping child awake and rejoicing at the sight of their tears.

With Agrippina’s purse and skill set, leading these two siblings down a sensible path would be trivial. It would be all too easy to teach the girl values befitting a mensch and to shape the boy’s childish ambitions into a more robust ideology.

Alas, the utter scoundrel threw all pretense of integrity to the wayside as she shoved her chips into the most entertaining pot she could find. If the maxim of gods leaving no sin unpunished was true, then surely a divine bolt of lightning or an apostle would come to smite her at this very second.

“If that is what you desire,” Agrippina went on, “you must make haste. Win your professorship and become wholly invincible. Grow so strong that even Erich cannot raise a single finger against you, and he shall know your arms to be the safest place in the world—that to stay there will be his greatest gift to you.”

“Me?” Elisa asked. “*Stronger?*”

“But of course. Erich amasses strength because he is stronger than you. He endures the burden of danger, the exhaustion of training, and the responsibility of earning money all for the weak Baby Elisa, doesn’t he? Now, tell me. What would happen if the opposite were true?”

“I... I would be the one...”

As you can see, the heavens were silent. Agrippina gave a wicked grin, well aware that she was pouring gasoline on the bonfire of Elisa’s resolve; the changeling beamed as if she’d just uncovered a gift from the absent gods.

Two creatures altogether estranged from ethics each let their own heavy emotions sink deep into their cores, and then carried on with lecture. Elsewhere, the brother was stepping into a bath to recollect himself; he was no doubt accosted by a terrible shivering fit.

How could he not be? After all, his sister was earnestly concocting a plan to keep him safe...from *everything* the world had to offer.

[Tips] At the end of the day, changelings are merely alfar in mensch frames.

Master Scene

Master Scene

A scene without PCs run entirely by the GM, most often used to explain the backdrop of an upcoming session or to give a glimpse into the lives of the NPCs of the world—friends and foes alike—in the aftermath of a completed adventure.

Let us speak of the nation they call the Empire.

The Trialist Empire of Rhine, as its official name went, was founded by Richard, the Emperor of Creation, with initial holdings in the eastern region of the western reach of the Central Continent; the ancient powerhouse was running 524 years strong.

There had been a tremendous state in the Central Continent in the final years of the Age of Gods, remembered by modern historians only by an informal moniker: the Blessed Kingdom. It met its demise with the era of divinity, and this great power's dissolution threw the whole landmass into bloody disarray.

The power struggles of the western reach were especially grisly. Though a tad chilly, the temperate lands were arable and fit for livestock; freshwater abounded in the rivers that cut through hospitable flatlands. One could see why the region had earned the name *Elysium* in the heavenly tongue used in those days.

But bounty begot battle. Among all creatures, man alone could not contain his thirst for more: how could such a beast rest easy when every conquered territory came with the promise of luxury?

Just as countless countries rose, fell, and rose again, so too was the Empire's tale stained in blood—and how could it not be, with the Founding Emperor's circumstances?

The Empire's namesake was the River Rhine, a massive waterway that flowed from south to north. In those days, the lovely maiden flowed beside countless tiny nations that were liable to disappear in a decade at best. This period of warring lesser states was a far cry from the Pax Imperia that would one day follow, but that future was far out of sight. For perspective, the Kingdom of Seine established its throne *centuries* before uncontested imperial hegemony.

Amidst the struggle, the lastborn son of a branch family of one of these minuscule nations thought to himself: "Should we continue to turn our fangs upon one another, we shall vanish as a snake

swallowing its own tail might. This disordered smattering of selfish fools has been propped up solely by the fruits of the lands on which they perch. In the presence of true power, their disorganized squirming will make it all too easy to claim the greatest share.”

Fed up with the frustrating incompetence of his clan, the boy began to establish his own house. Any other lastborn son in such a position would have been washed away in the muddy stream of history, but not Richard of Stuttgart—he who would one day become the Emperor of Creation, Richard von Baden-Stuttgart.

His first order of business was to tame the populace. After removing cruel local magistrates behind curtains, he directly promised the common people lower taxes and less compulsory labor for their allegiance. Using the funds from his loyal citizens, he raised an army to eliminate every last despot of his clan’s main branch to seize House Baden as its rightful ruler. The political spectacle of revolt had been possible in great part due to three allies Richard had made.

First, he’d befriended the werewolf warriors the Badens kept collared and chained, promising them emancipation and equal rights if they fought by his side.

Second, he came to the doorstep of the vampiric household that reigned over their largest neighboring state. However, he did not engage with the ancient, two-thousand-year-old patriarch of the clan; he instead turned to a fledgling barely a century old and already tired of the elders’ overbearing ways, and took the young immortal under his banner.

Third and final, Richard partnered with three minor kings. Each of the monarchs had vied for dominance on a quest for Rhinian unification, but had been forced back into their own borders by competitors. Reduced to longingly gazing at a succulent fruit rotting on its own branch, their ambitions were easily rekindled.

With talent and opportunity in hand, Richard swept across the land. His army spread through the Maiden’s Bosom—the most fertile part of the Rhine River Valley—faster than wildfire. So meticulously calculated were his marks and so flawless was his execution that the great historians who followed considered his campaign devoid of intrigue.

Richard’s territory expanded to enclose the favored maiden of the gods that scarce few had ever ruled, earning him the epithet of “the Little Conqueror.” While the moniker was in part a sarcastic jab at his unimpressive origins, those who uttered it did so knowing that he was a tireless engine of demolition and plunder, his front lines advancing with every annexation.

At last his callous and wanton invasions came to a pause as he turned to more diplomatic means. His progress had been so rapid that

the insignificant kings—dubbed so by history, not by personal choice—that were to oppose him found themselves without the time to coordinate their forces in coalition.

This was not, of course, a mere stroke of luck on Richard's part: with every new acquisition, he loaned his newfound resources for cheap to countries he did not yet plan to topple.

These beneficiaries had no intention of repaying any favors, but to bite the hand that fed was too daunting a challenge; instead, they turned on their historical rivals to further their own interests. Even the mightiest of contenders on the world stage could not spare time to strategize against Richard with a swarm of principalities nipping at their heels. Invariably, the Little Conqueror swooped in at the end as if to say, "Your time has come."

The man had an eye for people and opportunity. Although he never worked against his own interests, he was acutely sensitive to the power-hungry fools that he employed as pawns in his bloody grand design. Meanwhile, he plucked capable vassals from within his borders to establish loyal clans—many who enjoyed continued prestige in Modern Rhine, like the Five Generals or Thirteen Knights—who brought prosperity to the budding nation.

Richard's talents brought abundance, which became the foundation of a country too sturdy to easily upturn. That, in turn, bought him time. Eighteen years had passed since he had begun his revolt, but the man was still healthy and spirited. At the age of thirty-two, Richard founded the Trialist Empire of Rhine and declared himself Emperor.

Truth be told, Richard had only won the position of a high king. However, his sapling state had been born atop a pile of corpses, and he knew he needed more; haphazardly inheriting the titles of old would only amount to a gilded facade of prosperity sure to rot from within soon after.

Bloodshed had unified Rhine, and without stable footing, bloodshed would destroy it. Worse still, the death of a single great king could shatter the land back into pieces. Richard dreamed of a sturdy, towering tree that would not fall as soon as the gods recalled him to their lap: to this end, he relinquished the priceless commodity of time.

So began the Trialist Empire of Rhine.

The emperor came from one of the three great houses that had founded the Empire to begin with, and the three minor kings were rewarded for their loyal service with the awesome privilege of the vote. Not only did this prevent excessive consolidation of power, but it also helped quell discontent, as the ruler required the consent of the ruled.

Furthermore, if the emperor only commanded authority granted by electors, any attempt at revolution would amount to little more than the assassination of a figurehead. One would need to provide substantial cause to sway the wielders of power to join a militaristic coup.

Richard broke free from existing modes of rule and kicked aside the title of High King to crown himself the first-ever emperor. For those that coveted the title, the only rightful path to the throne was littered with his rules. He created more than a position: here he proclaimed the birth of a new world order.

A coronation unknown to the law crowned no true Emperor; a nation serving an illegitimate ruler was no true Empire. Richard had amassed much in a single generation, and this code would remain steadfast for all those who would come to inherit his treasures: he became the immaculate model of all the virtues Elysium expected of its master.

And so, the Empire found its footing.

With the bulwark of his noble houses by his side, Richard brought the scattered churches of the land into one pantheon with the promise of protection and independence, standardized systems of measurements and weights, and ironed out the legal system that underpinned Rhinian affairs. It had cost him fifteen years, but by the time he approached middle age, the Empire had become an unstoppable behemoth.

All that remained was the harvest: minor nations that had played for neutrality now eagerly entered the imperial umbrella, and cornered giants bent the knee to prolong their existences. By the time Richard was canonized as the Emperor of Creation, not a single lesser state lay on the maiden's banks.

The one emperor and three imperial houses had gained four electors for a total of seven, all from the 227 noble lineages that formed the backbone of the Empire. The hydra had swallowed the region whole to morph into a bizarre oligarchic monarchy that respected the rights and privileges of its lesser lords as if it were a federation.

The oddity of the system was the result of cumulative compromise. A single bloodline was too frail to bear the burden of the crown, but parliaments and oligarchies had failed before, and to leave power in the hands of the populace was a dream within a dream. With how liable it was to collapse, the castle was less built atop a pile of sand and more built *out of* sand.

Yet the process of coming to terms on common ground repeated ad nauseum had stacked up enough begrudging compliance for the Empire to continue expanding its borders for five centuries—few

could claim the political experiment to be a failure. Its flaws were many and its domestic history was rife with violent purges, but throughout it all, the Trialist Empire remained standing to the modern day.

It was here in this ancient nation that an old man sat alone, surrounded by magnificent ornaments, lavish furniture, and trophies of war ranging from swords to crowns. The walls of the expansive room were tastefully subdued, but they were not mere stone: a layer of elaborately patterned wallpaper covered the masonwork. The flooring was just as exquisite; a shag carpet covered every square inch of ground to seal away the cold earth below.

Light flickered on the shelves by the wall, and the glimmering treasures on display would surely cause any historian's eyes to fall out of their sockets. The royal crowns of fallen kingdoms, prized swords thought lost to time, and a fragment of the long-gone Blessed Kingdom's throne lined the display cases. Each was a symbol of forgotten glory, as if to say *this* was the might of Rhine.

The centerpiece of the room was a stately throne that teetered on the edge of excess, sure to paint all but the most dignified as charlatans when used. Embodying centuries of history, the seat doubled as a test of worth for any who dared to sit.

Even so, the graying gentleman atop it did not shrink away from his ceremonious surroundings. He did not rely on majestic possessions to inflate his person, but rather imbued them with greater regality by his presence.

His head retained a handsome gloss in spite of the white hairs weaving into his raven mane, and what at first appeared a skinny frame was chiseled from pure muscle without an ounce of waste. He wore the finest threads dyed in the color reserved for the imperial: a resplendent purple-blue.

The man's nose was sharp and high set, while his slender, ashen eyes gleamed with intimidating tenacity. Habit had sealed his lips tight and permanently furrowed his brow into an austere statesman's glare, robbing him of the frailty that so often came with age.

Similarly eye-catching ornaments lay atop his desk, and his chair was lined with magnificent cushioning dyed in the same imperial colors as his attire. Despite the comfort such padding no doubt provided, his back remained ruler-straight. He was closer to a perfectly sharpened spear than a man, complete with a pointed head: the crystallization of imperial authority rested on his pate in the form of a golden crown.

Let it be known that August Julius Ludwig Heinkel von Baden-Stuttgart was the rightful heir to House Stuttgart, chief among the imperial Baden bloodlines that descended directly from the Emperor

of Creation himself—here sat the reigning monarch, Emperor August IV. The gallant hero was infamous for climbing atop his drake and diving into the thick of the fight. He was so popular, in fact, that the number of sagas recounting his exploits rivaled the Black Flag Emperor, despite his still being alive.

The Emperor's lips parted. His deep, somber voice was frequently likened to that of the draconic mount he commanded. Two personal guests of his sat in the imperial office reserved for the most serious matters of state, ready to bear witness to words that would shake the Empire.

"Hear," he spoke. "I...grow weary of this."

"Shut the fuck up. The least you could do after calling us all the way out here is thank us for coming, asshole."

An aging werewolf snapped at the Emperor with words choice enough to knock a hypothetical onlooker flat on their rear. Beneath his stately mane, the manly lupine figure was scored with countless scars. His gray coat was wrapped in a fine purple-blue top, embroidered with his family crest of a great wolf. He and his flock were markedly different in appearance from the demonic cynocephali, and his demihuman kin would agree that he was an exceptionally strapping fellow—even as he grunted with a merciless glare.

"We get here and the first thing you do is grumble," he barked. "Have some shame. I was in the middle of whooping my idiots out west back into place, so you better have a good reason for making me march all the way back to the capital."

The werewolf was David McConnla von Graufrock, head of the Graufrock Duchy. As one-third of the imperial pie, his clan governed a large swath of land from the central north of the Empire to its western holdings. Once upon a time, his forefather had won his freedom by joining Richard against a tyrant; centuries later, the preeminent werewolf lineage still held the nation together with their military prowess.

The Graufrocks also boasted the right to rule, and David in particular had served as August IV's spear for many a moon and year. Having leapt into battle at the age of seven, he'd been an early bloomer even by werewolf standards. Nowadays, he was well regarded for continuing his track record of loyal service without showing a hint of his old age, as the sitting emperor's closest advisor.

How shocked the populace would be to hear him assault His Imperial Majesty with the filthy diction of a drunkard at the pub.

Alas, this was unavoidable: be they liege and vassal as they were, the true nature of their dynamic was better described as brothers in arms or partners in crime. David's second wife was August's younger sister—and the Founding Emperor's second wife had similarly been

the eldest sister of the first Graufrock—but their familial ties paled in comparison to their unyielding friendship.

“I’m going to sock you in your face if you recalled us just to complain. Oh, and I’m helping myself to a bottle or two from the vault while I’m at it.”

David’s remarks easily crossed the line, even for a candidate to the throne, but the Emperor showed no signs of caring. Had August’s retainers been present, they would have reached for their daggers, turning red in the face, but the man himself accepted the disrespect as a matter of course.

They had stood shoulder to shoulder, groveling in the same mud and eating from the same pot—they’d subsisted on “stew” that included anything edible they could get their hands on—on the front lines. What was there to hold back now?

The pair had made themselves busy with their fair share of mischief in their youth: they’d peeked up skirts, ventured into red-light districts, and gotten punched out of bars when they couldn’t pay their tab. David’s greeting could be considered on the civil side, considering their relationship.

“What wretched vassals I am burdened with,” August remarked. “Always swiping prized wines from my cellar for every little request... I shall never forget the day you pilfered my 244-year-old red Alsace over a tiny marriage interview.”

“Do you have any fucking clue how hard it was to rein in that wild beast for long enough to marry her off to your grandnephew? Plus, this time I had to stop my brats from running around and picking fights to make time to come.”

“I suspect the fault for that lies more with your genetics than with me... At any rate, I turned fifty-seven this past autumn. The gods will not punish you for treating me with more care.”

“Still early to bemoan one’s age, I’m sure you’ll agree.” A third voice entered the fray. In contrast to the booming vulgarities offered by the werewolf, this new speaker cut off the haggard August with sprightly vigor.

Not content to merely discount the Emperor’s cries, the man went so far as to plant his behind on the imperial desk. He fearlessly crossed his legs and casually began filing his fingernails—a show of flippancy that was grounds enough for him and his whole family to be beheaded and kept on pikes to decorate the castle gates for half a year.

The gentleman was frighteningly beautiful, like the hue of silver personified. He nestled a stylish silver wand beneath his arm, snuggled into his magus robes, and with his bangs neatly pulled back, Martin Werner von Erstreich openly displayed his particular silver

eyes.

Martin, too, was one of three who could lay claim to the throne, as evidenced by his family crest: a wine glass split in two. He was the progeny of the crafty vampire who had helped Richard overthrow the two-millennia-old ancient bloodsucker, all while politically maneuvering around the terrible accusation of treachery.

“You’re in the middle of your second term, aren’t you? Ha, that leaves plenty of room to spare. I suffered three, you recall. With how brief a period it is, I’d prefer to hear a more spirited declaration that you have another term in you yet.”

Such was the silver gentleman’s excuse for sitting on the imperial desk so brazenly. He had endured three fifteen-year terms signing papers on this very table. It was impossible for him to summon any restraint when interacting with property that was all but his own.

Martin’s two aging companions grimaced at his immortal arrogance. For a mensch and especially a werewolf—who on average lived thirty years less than mensch—fifteen years was an eternity. To have the whole of preadulthood written off as “brief” was objectionable from a mortal perspective.

“Wow,” David scoffed, “the mindset of a four-century-old geezer sure is something else.”

“With how unlike our perceptions of time are,” August added, “might I suggest you take a fourth term upon yourself? You, if anyone, surely have plenty of room to spare, Duke Erstreich. I reckon you shall take an afternoon nap and awake to find your tenure complete.”

Faced with a snarling werewolf and a glaring emperor, the mighty vampire nonchalantly blew the dust from his fingertips. His silver eyes flickered with discontent as he pointed his sharpened nails at them both.

“You’re to call me Professor Martin or simply Professor—how many times must I tell you this, gentlemen? I’ve expressed my distaste for that unromantic title on more occasions than I can remember. Ah, but forgive me: perhaps you two imbeciles left the ability to learn back inside of your mothers’ wombs.” Having said these damning words with all possible grace and civility, he added, “And I’m not a geezer. I’m still quite young, thank you.”

In fairness, vampires in foreign lands regularly strolled about at five hundred, and there was even a *princess* who’d celebrated her first millennium as of late. Martin was, relatively speaking, still young.

At any rate, these three were the colossi at the heart of the Trialist Empire. All of them were shrewd bureaucrats and played the part of liege and vassal perfectly in the public eye; if anyone acquainted with them were to see this scene, they would come to the conclusion that this was a distasteful performance from three impeccable body

doubles.

But of course, their conversation was raw, unfiltered reality.

“Y’know, Gustus,” David said, “you say you’re tired and all, but I heard from my craftsmen that you put in an order for a new set of drake gear. And not some fancy-ass ceremonial armor either. You’re buying a saddle with plenty of room to load up cargo.”

The werewolf casually dropped August’s nickname as he scrutinized the man’s claim of fatigue. Although his white hairs were certainly growing more numerous, the deep black that pervaded his branch of the Baden tree was still lush, and his gray eyes had just as much life in them as those of a man in his prime; those who lent him their hand when he climbed a flight of stairs did so as no more than a formality.

“It is a gift,” August answered. “I did not place the order to suit my personal interests. I recognize the gear may fit my lovely Durindana, but it is the product of coincidence, as I intend to bestow the equipment upon a drake of equal size.”

Lies spewed forth without a hint of hesitation: he didn’t so much as shift his gaze. The Dragon Rider’s moniker was no mere publicity stunt, and he’d grown up riding lesser drakes into battle. Even now, he pampered his trusty steed in the palace’s drake stables—evidence enough that he could not abandon his lifelong fixation on soaring through the open skies.

The Emperor’s military career had begun with the dream of flight. Determined to leave the earth beneath him, he had learned of a species of drake that man had narrowly managed to domesticate and enlist; to him, his appointment as the head of the clan and subsequent coronation were unsolicited byproducts of his success.

“Rumor has it that the third iteration of your aeronautical warship has been refitted again,” Martin remarked. “The, er, *Alexandrine*, was it? I’ve heard whispers of your stubborn insistence on equipping it with the capacity to launch draconic knights. ‘Weary’ indeed. Over at the College, not a day goes by without hearing a gripe about how ridiculous the final specifications have become.”

The vampiric professor glanced back to gauge the Emperor’s reaction to his provocation, but August was experienced. After navigating the world of politics—where foul intent sprouted faster than common weeds—for nearly three decades, this didn’t even faze him.

“That is a measure to better the survivability of the airship. Pray tell that you have yet to forget the tragedy of the *Kriemhild*.”

The Emperor’s retort was unwavering, his steadfast gaze more solid than steel. Who could believe that such a stalwart being had no scruples about using his salary and whatever imperial funds he could

to fuel his personal hobbies?

On the note of the aeronautical warship, the Empire was in the midst of a project that combined its impressive advancements in magecraft and shipbuilding. The theoretical concept had been hashed out half a century prior, and the tests had advanced to the third prototype build at present. As the wings to a new dawn, the airship was meant to strike awe into Rhine's neighbors while solving the state's lack of a large port, heralding the next age of prosperity.

The Trialist Empire had been a continental nation since its inception, and lacked any notable holdings on the coast. Although it bordered a good deal of ocean to the north, the majority of its shoreline was covered with unusable sheer bluffs; the few cooperative banks they had became unnavigable for anything more than local fishing boats come wintertime. This is to say, the Rhinians had no warm water port from which to launch larger vessels.

The lovely maiden from which they derived their name flowed to a verdant inland sea in the south, but even then, many points on the Rhine were not traversable for massive crafts. Ships also differed in make between those specialized for river and ocean travel, so artificial enlargement was not a viable solution.

For the moment, the satellite states Rhine kept in orbit to its south included seaside city-states that provided access to the southern sea, settling the immediate issue. Yet the Empire knew that a day would come when its inability to command open waters would come to bite it. To expand its already-excessive borders could cause the nation's already-strained central government undue tension, making conquest unappealing; still, the imperial leaders sought some means of oceanic access.

Their solution? *Airships*.

By constructing the vessel around an arcane engine and running quasi-mystic circuits imbued with anti-gravity and propulsion spells all throughout the build, the Empire would have access to the most endless sea of all: that which continued far into the heavens.

Or at least, it would once the many problems this plan came with were solved. Not only was the technology volatile, but it was incredibly difficult to recover from an error when hovering far above ground, and to top it all off, those who inhabited the skies interfered with progress to challenge imperial air supremacy.

The Empire's little wings had to account for all of these problems at once. To that end, those in charge of designing it were constantly testing new solutions that had proven innovative at best and bizarre at worst.

"You know," David butted in, "I've been thinking this for a while now, but why the hell'd you name the thing after your wife?"

“Forget the *Kriemhild*?” Martin repeated mockingly. “No, I remember—I remember well how a flock of drakes ran the *Kriemhild* aground, and how you *insisted* on commencing work on a new vessel in the wake of the tragedy, you spendthrift.”

“The airship will revolutionize trade and warfare!” August shouted. “This investment is no waste or whim! And the ship was christened by means of public vote!”

“Come the fuck on, you’re the *Emperor*!” the werewolf shouted back. “Renaming the damn thing should’ve been child’s play! What the hell are you going to say if it sinks?!”

“Then at least keep the scale modest!” the vampire joined in. “Why couldn’t we begin large-scale construction *after* developing reliable flight?! You might as well ask a novice shipwright to hammer out the frame!”

“It won’t sink!” the Emperor boomed. “Anything graced with Alexandrine’s name is destined for greatness!”

“Oh, I fucking knew it, you stupid lovebird!”

“Why must you be so insistent in your baseless confidence, you fool?!”

Any one of these exchanges would cause a devoted patriot to cough up their guts and die on the spot, and the three greatest powers in the Empire continued their charade for another ten or twenty minutes. As a matter of course, the ceaseless fonts of indignity were only sealed when the Emperor—the impetus of all this, mind you—brought down his fist.

“**Enough!** I am at my limit! Let me resign!” August hurled the crown from his head—an act that would make some skip past fainting straight to sudden death—and jumped to his feet. “I tried to refuse this second term as well, only for you two to conspire to keep me on the throne! One of you—I don’t care who—switch with me!”

“You mustn’t ask for the impossible, Your Majesty!” David cried. “I am a withering thirty-two years of age, no less atrophied than a mensch such as yourself at fifty-seven. And oh, the horror! My old wounds rouse me without fail each night! How inconceivable it would be to punish—I mean, *entrust* such a pitiful soul with the great responsibility of sovereignty!”

“The post exceeds my capacity, Your Majesty!” Martin proclaimed. “Alas, my meager talents leave me unable to take on any more than my current mission of checking the power of the nation’s artisan unions to secure our financial interests. Should I abandon my office and allow internal trade wars to wage unabated, the citizenry you care for as your own sons and daughters will suffer horrors the likes of which have remained unseen since the foreign invasion prevented by the Black Flag! Please, reconsider! You must understand

that our tenuous peace rests upon your shoulders!”

“Your Majesty this, Your Majesty that—only at times like these do you ingrates perform the part of loyal vassals! Fine, then consider this an imperial mandate! *Switch with me!*”

The dictionary contained no word severe enough to describe their ignobility as the men shouted themselves hoarse. Perhaps it was enough that they retained the bare minimum of good sense to keep their battle to the realm of repartee as opposed to that of fisticuffs.

Only after each had taken a glass of water did their tempers cool, allowing them all to remember that they were grown adults. They took a moment to wipe their sweat or Clean themselves in a belated attempt to don some guise of dignity. With renewed airs, they resumed discussion on a topic that could alter the fate of the Empire—but at its core, this remained the world’s most worthless game of musical chairs, wherein the goal was *not* to sit.

“Ahem... I have been sleeping poorly as of late, and I wake each morning to terrible coughing fits. Age has robbed me of my vigor to the extent that I can no longer hide the effects of my poor health on my work. No longer can I fulfill my duties as emperor.”

Properly crowned once more, Emperor August IV coughed with clear deliberation. True, it sounded genuinely painful; however, the magus at the table noted he’d cast some sort of physical manipulation magic. Employing remarkable skill to inane ends must have been some sort of cultural tradition in Rhine.

“This is coming from the guy who nearly worked his personal guards to death by doing his imperial tour on drakeback because it was faster...”

“How odd. I recall you’d been quite animated when coming to see our progress on the *Alexandrine*... I must be misremembering.”

The Emperor gracefully ignored his grumbling dukes and glanced over at the werewolf. “When the winds carry the scent of war, the valiant House Graufrock is best at the helm. Say, have you heard the rumors of the giants stirring in the Frost Spirit’s Peaks?”

“As if. It’s too late for them to come out now. But seriously, I really can’t handle it. I don’t think I’ll last another fifteen years in good health. The court physician doesn’t look too pleased with my condition, and my brat still doesn’t have the experience to lead...”

August could say nothing to this excuse. The two of them had been together through thick and thin—including the baffling incident when David, the patriarch of one of the imperial houses, had helped him escape the castle and earned himself a temporary ban from the palace for his troubles—and he knew his old friend was on his last legs.

The average werewolf lived to fifty, and even the healthiest barely

ever made it past seventy. At thirty-two, David was well within range of planning his retirement.

With that in mind, August's gaze shifted to the vampire. He'd dealt with plenty of crafty career politicians during his reign, and continuing the conversation as if he hadn't literally just nominated Duke Graufrock for the throne was hardly a challenge.

"To match our mighty rivals, an unflinching foundation will be paramount for our nation. I believe duty calls for you, Duke Erstreich."

"*Professor*," the immortal vampire mumbled, averting his eyes.

August's nomination had compelling grounds: unaging beings did indeed tend to benefit from their disposition when on the throne. They were less likely to lose sight of a set plan, and they did not overexert themselves to rush out a project like their short-lived counterparts did when the reaper was in sight, making them perfect for carrying out long-term schemes.

In fact, for the greater part of the Trialist Empire's peacetime—or at least, that of cold wars disguised as peace—House Erstreich had been the ones to steer the country toward economic prosperity. Their indifference to life made them less suitable for battle, but none could match their patience on a long-term investment. The macroeconomics of a state could only truly show change in long increments of five years or so, after all.

"True," David chimed in. "It'll be peaceful for a while. The two of us cleaned up all the big wars."

"The eastern conquest was an ordeal," August added. "Both you and I lived on the front lines for two whole years."

"Excuse me?!" Martin exclaimed. "I think you're forgetting about someone who toiled to secure supply lines and restructure the army!"

Having already been denied once, the Emperor completely ignored Martin; the werewolf was content to do the same so long as the hot potato was not in his hands. Together, the pair made for a mighty coalition: the Baden and Graufrock clans had close ties to four of the electorate houses—over half. Though August's family would not be enthused about letting their representative abdicate, they were more likely to bide their time until their next emperor than to put up any real resistance.

This was indicative of the major peculiarity of imperial politics, the greatest flaw in the system: for all its apparent fluidity, the top families of high society were distinct in name only.

Relations between the imperial houses needed no introduction. The Founding Emperor had taken an Erstreich princess as his legal wife, and his son had wed a Graufrock. The first Duke Erstreich—also known as the second emperor—had doted on Richard's younger sister

as his favorite mistress, and his son had also wed a Graufrock. House Graufrock, in turn, drew blood from both other duchies. For the lords of these houses, they were sure to have a relative in power no matter who wore the crown.

Little changed for the electorate houses. While most monarchies disallowed marquises like them from marrying into royalty, the Empire's restrictions were far more lax. Brides and grooms could be welcomed into the innermost court of the palace, and imperial princes and princesses commonly relinquished status to wed into these lesser houses. Again, they were all effectively related.

If an elector ever dreamed of seeing their kin crowned, they were sure to take the diplomatic path of marriage. Such games of statecraft could only be played against a backdrop of relative peace and prosperity, thus discouraging rash actions. This collusion allowed the Empire to dodge the violent struggles of succession and subsequent fragmentation that plagued other nations; as wonderful as this was, it also meant everyone involved had to close their eyes and pretend not to see the blatant put-up job on display.

That said, being emperor came with far more weight than any soul could imagine. If a sorry wretch intoxicated with lust for power found himself in a position to claim the title, he would be crushed underneath the endless work, overwhelming responsibility, and the nigh unrealizable expectations set by his retainers and in-laws—a fact that helped to keep the machine running after hundreds of years.

“Why not cede to the crown prince?” Martin asked. “I would be happy to back his ascension.”

Although the Trialist Empire was not a hereditary monarchy, the crown prince could assume power in times of emergency. In some edge cases, previous emperors had handed over the reins to particularly trustworthy princes, so the precedent was there; unfortunately, Martin's desperate suggestion only drew a deep, deep sigh from August.

“I don't know what got into that thankless urchin, but he threatened to remarry his wife into her family abroad if I tried... Do you truly think I would fail to consider easier options before summoning the two of you?”

“Whoa there,” David said. “You know how much of a hassle it'll be if another dukedom pops up? If he throws our satellites into chaos over this bullshit, I swear...”

“Is that even possible?” Martin questioned. “Surely not, yes? The gods and their churches will never allow him to remarry his own wife to enter her family.”

“That buffoon has connections on that end,” August muttered, his voice downcast. “The pious brat.”

As the heaviness of the Emperor's heart dragged down the atmosphere, silence set in upon the room. The vampire's eyes darted back and forth as he contemplated amidst the quiet tension.

Hook, line, and sinker, the other two thought at once. But just as they began to start considering how to deliver the news to the electors, the ingenious magus struck epiphany. The vampire had earned his professorship without abusing his political position, and his intelligence was not just for show.

"I know! I shall yield my estate to my daughter!"

Martin decided to offer his beloved daughter of forty years as a human sacri— Ahem, he decided to unveil his newfound ambition to place his child in the venerated seat of the Emperor, all with a refreshed smile on his face.

[Tips] The three imperial houses are the most powerful families in the Rhinian Empire. The leaders of the two clans not currently sitting are considered dukes, and serve the Emperor as trusted counsel—on the surface. In actuality, they are a web of relatives who treat one another as such.

Early Spring of the Thirteenth Year

Bonds with PCs

Some games include systems of rapport that extend beyond PC-NPC relations to quantify intra-PC connections, and may even include unavoidable events that cause unforeseen changes to those ties. Like may turn to love; friendship may turn to hatred; at times, two may forget one another entirely. These systems are often fraught, but the accomplishment of navigating the challenge successfully is like no other.

With the harsh winter of the capital behind us, the gentle onset of spring made its presence known with the first instance of uncovered greenery in months—much to the joy of my horses. There was only so much they could do in the winter. Even normal horses felt stressed after being cooped up inside all season, so I could hardly imagine how stuffy it must have been for two warhorses bred to run at all hours of the day.

“Giddyup!”

I kicked Castor’s sides and he stretched out his neck with a huff, galloping forward with long strides. Although he accelerated slowly, he could maintain top speed for a long while once he got there; I had to lift up my rear and clamp onto the saddle with my thighs just to keep balance.

Tightly wound muscles ebbed and flowed underneath his onyx mane, and a torrent of sweat poured out to make his excitement plain. From the other side of the reins, I could feel his intense desire to sustain this speed for as long as I could let him.

While I felt sorry for the poor steeds marched into war zones at the whim of their riders and those burdened with great loads, it was clear that the running in and of itself was of great pleasure to them. And at times, they were happy to carry the weight of one extra mensch on top.

How wonderful it must be to just run to your heart’s content without any goal in sight.

I bounced my hips with every step to steady my upper body and let Castor have his way. As I rode, another set of clattering hooves approached from behind: I peered over my shoulder to find Mika and Polydeukes catching up.

“Ahhh! Fast—too fast! Agh! W-W-W-Wait, wait, no, hold on! Polydeukes!”

My old chum was desperately clinging to the younger of the Dioscuri. He may have been shrieking like a little girl, but his taller height, broader shoulders, and wavier hair were the results of his male shift.

Now a few months past the start of winter, this made for the second time I’d seen his masculine form. As I’d suspected, those blessed with good looks remained handsome regardless of gender—proof of the unflinching unfairness of life. Still, seeing him all panicked reduced his charms to mere childish cuteness.

“Mika! Don’t cling to him like that! It’ll just make you bounce harder!”

I shouted through a Voice Transfer so he’d hear me over the hoofbeats, and I heard him scream in the distance that he would if he could. I’d thought him used to jockeying by now, but judging by the tears welling up as he clung to Polydeukes for dear life, he wasn’t ready for a full-on sprint.

“I-I’m s-scared!” Mika squealed. “This is—oh, this is too fast! I’m scared! Save me! Save meee!”

“Don’t be a wuss! I’ll catch you with a Hand if you fall, so sit up! Riding like that is harder *and* more dangerous!”

“No, no, no way! S-Stop, please! Come on, I’m pulling the reins! Polydeukes, please!”

“Quit pulling back and let him dictate the pace! If you sour his mood, he might throw you off!”

“Whaaat?!”

Seeing his brother let loose had made Polydeukes give chase, and evidently, it was still too early to bring Mika along for the race when he’d only just gotten comfortable with long rides.

“You’re awful... You’re terrible, Erich... Why didn’t you slow down?”

By the time we finally stopped at the edge of the forest, my friend had been reduced to a pancake who could only glare at me from atop the saddle. All that extra resistance had kept Polydeukes ten lengths behind, and he made his discontentment known with a snort.

“I told you not to push yourself,” I sighed. “Not even I can stop Castor once he gets that excited. Horses are tough to keep in line.”

With the snow gone, I’d planned on letting them let off some steam. Mika and I were due to visit our usual foraging grounds for a quest, so I’d wanted them to at least get one good sprint in each.

I had told Mika he could take it easy and catch up later, but *he* had been the one to refuse me. “Hey now, who do you take me for, old pal?” he’d said with a smug grin. “I’m pretty sure I know my way

around these two by now.”

Of course, I’d warned him that a full-speed gallop was worlds apart from what he’d seen thus far—especially when he was on his own and couldn’t just cling to me—but alas.

“Ugh...”

“Come on,” I said, “that’s enough moping about. You were the one that said I didn’t have to hold back when you’re a boy, remember?”

For all his big talk of being able to keep up with more roughhousing, Mika was quick to tire out. I jeered at him to get down like I would to one of my brothers, and he shot me a sidelong set of puppy-dog eyes. As of late, he’d really begun to make use of his good looks, the clever rascal.

I gave in and lent him a hand: I pulled him off the saddle and carried him sideways into the forest. This did wonders to mend his terrible mood, and he ended up being even more motivated than usual for our herb gathering.

“That should do it.”

“This list always looks like it’s coming from a brewery,” said Mika. “Are we really helping someone with arcane research?”

We clapped the dirt off our hands and double-checked our knapsacks to finish off our task. Foraging for herbs here was routine at this point, and we knew all the most fertile spots and how long it took for new buds to pop up. Despite all the other students we ran into here, the abundance of resources let us avoid any troublesome quarrels.

Mika and I washed our hands to make sure the residual herb dust wouldn’t harm our skin and found a big tree to sit down by. The warming weather meant we’d worked up a mild sweat, so the shade and cool breeze felt wonderful.

Exercise was a wonderful thing: I couldn’t dwell on my problems so long as my body was moving.

“Ooh, a pie for lunch?” Mika asked. “Feeling luxurious, are we?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. My housekeeper made it for me when I told her I’d be going for a trip at noon.”

“Wait... Don’t you live in the low quarter?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,” I said, slicing into the Ashen Fraulein’s pie. I’d brought it along in a wickerwork basket stuffed into Castor’s saddlebag, but two layers of Unseen Hands had been enough to keep it looking pristine.

I scooped up the slice with my everyday knife and carefully brought it up to eye level to find it had been stuffed with meat. The silkie was partial to making dishes from the islands in the far north, so this was probably an intestinal pie.

“Thanks,” Mika said, taking the piece. “Looks like we’re in for a

solid meal.”

“Right? I kept it warm with magic, so the crust should still be nice and crisp.”

He eyed the food for a while before taking a large bite out of it, and his eyes instantly shot open. I worriedly asked if it didn’t suit his tastes, but he instead explained that he’d eaten this sort of thing back in his hometown. Come to think of it, the polar archipelago was a hotbed of rotating lords and kings, so many people native to the region sought refuge in the northern reaches of the Empire.

“Mmph, yum!” he beamed. “It barely has any stink to it. If you ever eat one of these made by an amateur, the stench that leaks out as soon as you cut it open makes it completely inedible.”

“This sure is good,” I agreed. “There’s no covering up the smell of innards, but this gamey flavor actually makes it better. I bet she spent a long time preparing the meat.”

“That reminds me—my mom used to try all sorts of things, like burying rosemary in the filling instead of just rubbing it on, or waking up in the middle of the night just to replace the saltwater bath the meat stewed in... Good times.”

Mika chewed on the pie and the emotions it uncorked as we reminisced, and the hefty lunch was safe in our stomachs before we knew it. Pressing the leftover crumbs against our fingers and pecking at them was hideously bad manners, but forgive us: we were two growing teenagers who needed all the food we could get.

“Phew,” Mika sighed. “Allow me to repay you the wonderful meal with a morsel of intriguing news.”

I was in the middle of greedily licking the oil from my hands when he suddenly shifted the conversation with flourish. I eyed him curiously, and he pulled out a crumpled slip from his inner pocket. The shoddy plant-based paper paradoxically bore the overblown words *Imperial Order: His Imperial Majesty’s Berylinian Parade*.

“A Berylinian Parade?” I read aloud.

“Every few years,” Mika explained, “the military holds this parade as the winter season of high society ends to see off the nobles returning home and give everyone an excuse to de-stress. They start from the northern castle of Weiss Morgana and march around the capital’s four biggest roads to get back to Blutschloss in the west. Seeing a bunch of knights and nobles strutting through town all dressed up for half a day is a real spectacle.”

The chalk fortress in the north was the judicial center of Rhine. It officially went by a different name; Weiss Morgana was, to my knowledge, a nickname coined by locals that had stuck. The Empire’s official name was likely more stiff and respectable.

The gentle redbrick structure to the west was the headquarters for

military affairs, and they also were unfond of their nickname. In fact, we College affiliates were the odd ones out for referring to our nest so playfully as Krahenschanze; those who referred to the blue castle of culture to the east as Schwulst Palaste—literally “showy palace”—were sure to do so with animosity in their hearts. Not even the people of Berylin were *that* pretentious.

I found it all very clever that the army was to march from the house of law to the house of arms: it spoke to the Rhinian axiom that might meant nothing without order, and that order without might was an unattainable daydream. I had no doubt that the planners behind the march arranged this path to appeal to those canny enough to spot the metaphorical gesture.

“All three of the imperial houses are coming this year, so it should be a grand old time. There’ll be a bunch of street stalls too. How about it? Wanna go together?”

“So it’s kinda like a festival,” I said. “Sounds fun.”

Far from a farming community, Berylin was devoid of festivities unless the government went out of its way to set something up. On Foundation Day and the Emperor’s birthday and the like, the common people were treated to wine, bread, and access to select castles and estates—the upcoming parade would be no different.

Furthermore, it gave us lay people something to gawk at, gave the attention-seeking gentry a chance to show off, and even served to shock and awe any foreign diplomats visiting the city. One could plainly see how stringent the Empire was: if it was going to use its precious funds, it was going to get more than one or two uses out of every dime.

And you know what? If the state was going to offer me its hospitality, I was more than happy to oblige.

“Hey, Mika,” I said. “There’s one thing I want to ask about first.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Would you mind if I brought along my sister?”

This would make a great change of pace for Elisa with all the studying she was doing lately, and it was the perfect excuse to introduce her to my new friend. To be blunt, my sister was unsociable—or at least, super shy. Mika’s past trauma made him similarly put off by the idea of expanding his social circle: when people talked to him, he usually sidestepped them and avoided making deeper ties.

I’d wanted the two to meet for some time now. Not only were they both students—I blatantly ignored their differing schools and cadres—but I also simply wanted to show off my wonderful friend to my family.

“Your sister, huh? She ended up here with a lot of strings attached, if I recall.”

“Yep. Plus, she’s really shy, so I don’t even think she’s made an *acquaintance* since moving to the capital. I want to help her make some connections early on. I mean, she’s not an official student yet, but...”

“But she’ll need it in the future, right?” Mika leaned back against the bark and slowly slid down to the ground. His cloudy expression betrayed his lingering apprehension at getting to know more people.

The College was a serious place of study, wholly different from the playground of moratorium I knew university to be. Whether their goal was to peer into the depths of magic or win a position as a bureaucrat, every student was earnest in their efforts to better themselves and succeed. I knew as much from my time with Mika: not once had he ever uttered a half-baked complaint about attendance rules or report deadlines.

But my experience did tell me one thing: Elisa was going to need friends. At times she would need the help of others to sort through research papers or to perform multi-man experiments, and making companions out of her fellow classmates would probably become a necessity. Call me cold and calculating, but I stood by the idea that there wasn’t anything wrong with trying to smooth out my sister’s thorny path.

As far as Mika went... Well, I didn’t intend to overstep my bounds. I wasn’t some out-of-touch teacher, and I wasn’t going to force him to step out of his comfort zone if he didn’t want to. Still, I couldn’t deny the small hope that this could be his opportunity to overcome his past traumas.

From all the time we spent together, I was sure that Mika wasn’t antisocial. In fact, I’d go so far as to say he was inherently sociable and was at his happiest when spending time with others. While he probably favored making a few treasured connections to casting his net wide, it didn’t seem like he was against the idea of having more friends.

He had simply been hurt by the invisible walls in his hometown and the insensitivity of his classmates—again, I couldn’t blame them, since they were also just kids—and naturally cooped himself up in his own bubble. I had an inkling that deep down, he wanted to try talking to new people. That said, I had no plans of abusing my position to butt in and “fix” his internal struggles. I hadn’t understood this in my youth, but after crossing the threshold of adulthood once, I knew well: picking off another’s scab never ends well.

Only the injured can feel how a wound is healing. To know whether a dried clot of blood is filled with pus or simply needs more time to heal is a delicate issue, and oftentimes confuses even the very person it affects. To tear off that seal can only end one way—it would

be less surprising than a match lighting ablaze when thrown into a fire.

If I tried to reopen his old wounds, it could worsen his pain or leave a throbbing scar that would linger with him forever. I didn't want to be the sort of "friend" who would force him into something he wasn't ready for.

Still, if nothing else, I wanted to help steer him onto a path where he would one day forget about his trauma entirely, until the dried scab fell off on its own accord. Mika truly thought of me as a friend; I hoped that perhaps meeting my own flesh and blood would be a bit easier for him. If all went well, that could become the stone for him to take another step forward on, and then another, until his injured heart was fully healed.

My suggestion did not receive a ready reply. Mika silently stared up at the heavens, his irises swaying alongside the branches dancing in the wind. Lost in thought, his eyes were following their movements on autopilot.

I didn't rush him; instead, I placed the bag of strawberries we'd picked for dessert on his stomach. Mika's hand rummaged around robotically and plucked a fat, red fruit, carrying the snack to his lips, just as red. He reached for a second, then a third, and in place of a fourth, he at last spoke.

"...Yeah." Swiping away a dribbling bead of strawberry juice with his thumb, Mika sat up and swiveled around to face me. "I've actually been curious, since you always talk about her. I'd be more than happy to finally meet the famed cutest girl in the world."

Mika's dashing features were warped into a markedly clumsy smile, half-excited and half-afraid; but to me, what shone through the brightest was his unwavering courage.

[Tips] Parades see knights, officials, and their servants marching through the city in a display of military might. Those who march take pride in their beautiful garb and the cheers of the people; those who watch rest easy at night knowing the great might of those who protect them.

In the words of Lady Agrippina, these were vain castles in the capital of vanity; yet, at times, that gilded veneer was what swayed men's hearts.

"Wow," I said. "Look at that, Elisa."

"Pretty! Pretty, Dear Brother!"

I'd loaded Elisa up on my shoulders to make sure she wouldn't get lost amidst her excitement. I knew the crown had mandated festive decorations, but the sights of the town were really something to

behold.

The mystic streetlights that stood at every corner each served as the pole to a flag embroidered with the national emblem of a three-headed drake (representing the three imperial houses). Houses on major streets were covered in all sorts of fantastical banners, making a mere walk candy for the eyes.

Soldiers had obviously cleared out the route to be marched, but just an alley away from the projected path, one could find all manner of street stalls being run by the city's populous merchant class. I couldn't even count the number of shops selling food and water, not to mention the foreign textiles, clothes, lifestyle goods, knickknacks, and even weapons on display.

"Ice candies!" Elisa exclaimed. "Dear Brother, there's ice candies!"

"There really are," I agreed. "Let's get some later, okay?"

All her enthusiasm had caused Elisa's speech to devolve a bit, and she began to kick her legs as soon as she spotted her favorite frozen treat. *There there, calm down*, I prayed. *I'll buy you some later. I don't know what I'll do if you get this fancy outfit dirty, so calm down, please.*

Elisa's clothing had been, alas, handpicked by Lady Leizniz before leaving the College. Her gothic evening wear utilized enough silk and velvet for one to buy a house with the raw materials, and was arranged in a way that made me question whether the design had arrived a few decades too early for my baby sister to wear. The deep maroon trimmed with black and scarlet puffed up her shoulders and fit snugly near the waist to make for an unnecessarily mature contour for a girl her age.

On the lower half, she had a shorter skirt that only went down to her knees, which the wraith had gone so far as to puff up with a metal wireframe. Her thin black tights had intricate embroidery all across them; this wasn't very standard for gothic styles, but probably arose from Lady Leizniz's penchant for making her unique tastes known.

That woman was so bizarrely fixated on forcing long gloves and patterned tights onto little girls. The moment wherein she'd called for a seamstress crying, "I *must* see the shape of her knees!" would sit in a special part of my heart for as long as I lived—the part labeled emotional trauma, of course.

Despite wearing what amounted to a Player 2 alternate color of Alice's dress in Wonderland, my sister once again earned her spot as the cutest girl ever by pulling it off. Lady Leizniz had given it to her, since it was a day to celebrate—for whomever did she mean, I wondered—and it had thankfully done away with the minor tantrum she'd been throwing before we left.

Elisa was a sweet little girl, but...*man*, was it hard to make her happy once her mood soured.

Me, you ask? I was keeping it simple. I'd told Lady Leizniz I might need to move around, so she let me off with a silk shirt, skinny pants, and a double-button vest—just barely enough to look classy. The all-black base and embroidered silver thread made me feel like I was playing right into her tastes, but...I was just glad to not look like the mangaesque princess knight again.

Even so, we blended right into the crowd. Nobody wanted to miss out on one of the few festivities the capital offered, and everyone around us had wrung out their meager wallets to doll up for the event.

I found this impressive on more than just an aesthetic level. Fashion was expensive, and especially so for something that did little to improve one's daily life, so it usually ended up at the bottom of anyone's priority list.

Our hometown was a pretty regular place where nobody truly struggled to get by, but chasing trends had been a completely foreign idea. People were happy to put in some clever effort to look nicer—herbal makeup had been pretty popular—but spending money for the privilege of fretting over dirt and grime was something we'd all put off until absolutely necessary.

Fancy clothes only came out at weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies; even then, they were sewn up right before the event and younger brothers were expected to reuse the eldest's threads. That was how expensive clothing was in this day and age.

But you wouldn't know it looking at this. While no one wore anything that overstepped the bounds of their social caste, it was a marvel to see everyone clad in colorfully dyed fabrics. Some were clearly giving it their all: a commoner needed to pinch a lot of pennies to afford the silk veils I saw on some women passing by.

Truly a befitting scene for a festival in the capital of vanity.

Sarcasm aside, the gorgeous scene was likely only possible because of all the aristocrats living in Berylin. Tastes of the upper class ebbed and flowed, and it followed that poorer nobles shopped secondhand for things out of fashion; as the cycle repeated and certain styles became unwearable for a self-respecting member of high society, they naturally fell to stores patronized by common people.

These tailors then broke down old clothes into their fancy raw parts, rearranging them into something usable by wealthy lay folk; from there the cycle continued among the populace until eventually, a nobleman's trash turned into a commoner's treasure. This, too, was probably an attempt at intimidating foreign diplomats. *They sure have thought of everything.*

I waded through the bustling sea of pretty costumes toward our meeting spot. As a lover of flair, Mika had thrown all pretense of convenience to the wayside and suggested for us to meet up at a plaza

a ways from the College—the festive air had gotten to him too.

Originally built as a buffer against the spread of potential fire, the clearing was ordinarily only used to wash small objects, but today it was swarming with people. Usually only home to a lonely fountain—another fire-prevention measure—and a few benches, the place was packed with street stalls and citizens sizing up wares as they waited for the marching to begin.

We were fated to drown in people no matter where we went, it seemed. People from nearby cities and cantons must have made the trip over for a spot this secluded to be this packed; impressive, considering how little marketing there had been for the event.

I thought it might be difficult to pick Mika out from all the other people in the crowd...but I was wrong. Resting on the edge of the fountain, my friend was very much standing out.

Glossier than the wings of a wet raven, he'd clearly bathed or rubbed in some oils, because a shining halo of light gleamed off his hair, to say nothing of how his snowy northern skin beamed under the sun. His build was sturdier as a boy, and he nicely filled out a deep navy robe—the classiest color a lowborn kid could get away with wearing.

Carrying his well-worn wand under his arm was the cherry on top. His troubled expression was sure to draw the eyes of ladies passing by—or rather, it had.

Three young women surrounded Mika, eagerly chatting away to vie for his attention. Judging from their mannerisms and overt attempts at dressing up with clothes of middling make, they were all commoners; still, they were middle class with access to proper education, so I surmised that they were part of the merchant class that made up the majority of Berylin's population. Not only that, but they were clearly the daughters or apprentices of large companies that frequently dealt with the upper crust.

"Him, Dear Brother?" Elisa had caught my gaze and pointed at Mika.

"That's right. See, isn't he handsome?"

"Mmm...mm?"

Much to my surprise, Elisa's response was more confused than affirmative. I figured she was probably still too young to understand what it was like to find someone attractive.

Anyway, seeing my buddy flounder through the ladies' flirting was novel and entertaining, but I couldn't just sit and watch forever.

"Mika!" I said, raising my hand.

"Oh, old pal!"

Mika happily waved back to show his gratitude at being saved, but when I briskly made my way over, he shut up, looking at the girl

on my shoulders with a confused set of blinks.

“Ladies,” I said, “I beg your pardon, but would you pray withdraw for the day? As you can see, we have made plans to see the sights of the parade as a party of three, and today marks an important opportunity to acquaint my sister and friend.”

I deliberately employed the most refined palatial speech I could to hint that I had ties to aristocracy, and the women retreated in disappointment. Truth be told, two of them had eyed Mika and I as a set and attempted to continue the conversation, but the third thankfully tugged at their sleeves.

As they all turned away, I read the woman’s lips: “Those clothes come from a famous noble brand. We shouldn’t push our luck.”

Apparently, she’d connected some dots based on my clothes. As cramped and humiliating as my outfit was, I had to admit that Lady Leizniz’s favor had been helpful, just this once.

“You really saved me there, Erich,” Mika said. “But boy, I never thought you’d bring a real fairy with you.”

Being stared at by a stranger scared Elisa, and she squeezed her legs tight with fear. I knew it was tough for her to overcome her shyness, but I really wished she wouldn’t choke me out for it; I tapped on her thighs to tell her to loosen up, and while she softened her grip, she still wasn’t fully relaxed.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Mika asked. “That was awfully rude of me to call out to a proper lady without a family member’s permission. Will you do me the pleasure of introducing me to this wonderful sister of yours, Erich?”

“Of course,” I said. “Come on, Elisa. Let’s get down, okay?”

“Mmkay... Oh! I mean, yes, Dear Brother.”

I let Elisa down and had her stand straight up. I waited for her to fix her dress and posture, just like she did in her lessons, and gave her a little push to have her step toward Mika.

“O friend from the north, it is an honor unmatched to acquaint thee with mine own flesh and blood. Here stands Elisa of Konigstuhl canton, eldest daughter to Johannes.”

My introduction was bombastic enough to stay in line with our usual games of wordplay, but it wasn’t *technically* out of place. No one actually announced themselves in this old-timey way anymore, but I decided to follow tradition to herald the coming of my beloved baby sister, and Mika was ready to match.

“O friend from the south, no word of thanks can express my gratitudes at meeting thy kin on this blessed day. Allow me to name myself: I am Mika, a mage who hath ridden the northern gales to this land. My allegiance lies with the Hannawald cadre within the School of First Light. O lovely maiden, wouldst thou do me the highest honor

of a formal introduction?”

Mika put his left hand across his chest, opened his right palm at belt level, and stepped back with his right foot—the typical greeting magia offered to those that outranked them. Most switched right and left here, but the magia deliberately broke norms in order to announce their background at first impression.

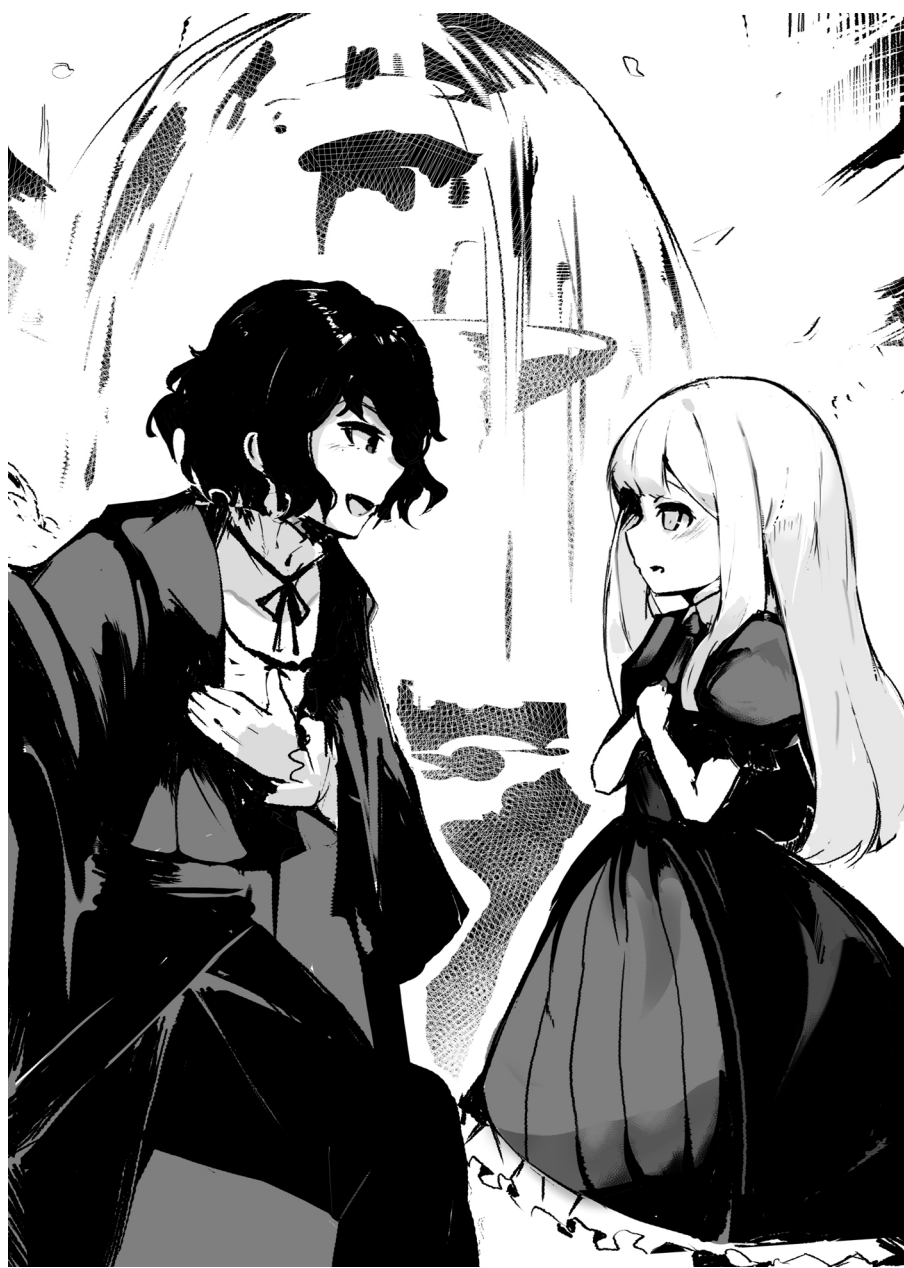
There were alternative theories for why this came about. Some said that by showing a wandless right hand, one showed respect and lack of hostility. Others said that placing the left hand—associated with herbs and medicine—near the heart was a sign of reverence. With how fluidly the rules of etiquette changed, I didn’t know the truth, but it was probably similar to how someone had first decided that napkins were to be picked up from the right side.

“I...” Elisa paused for a moment. “I am Elisa of Konigstuhl, direct disciple to Lady Agrippina du Stahl, Leizniz cadre, School of Daybreak. Mr. Mika, I am delighted to make your acquaintance, and it is a great pleasure to meet you.”

A massive wave of applause swept through my heart. After a minor hiccup at the start, Elisa managed to get through her entire greeting perfectly. If I could’ve gotten away with it, I would have summoned a whole gang of Unseen Hands to give her the praise she deserved.

Good job, Elisa! I’m so proud of you! She didn’t even say “um” a single time! Our little princess is a genius!

“Thank you kindly for the graceful introduction,” Mika said. “I hope ours is a wonderful relationship, Miss Elisa.”



This was far from necessary between commoners, but my friend lifted his robe and bent his knee. I instantly summoned a Hand to keep his garments from getting dirty, and he flashed me a thin smile. While we weren't always totally in sync, I suspected he'd knelt down knowing I'd cover for him.

Elisa caught on quickly and extended her right hand. Mika took it into his own and placed a kiss atop her glove—a formality that represented respect from man to woman and intimacy the other way around.

I was no Lady Leizniz, but seeing my adorable sister and my handsome friend like this was picturesque. If their overwhelming beauty was enough to wow me, then it was all the more imperative that I never let that one-of-a-kind eccentric lay eyes on them together.

No, wait a second. There was a chance that the blinding wholesomeness of their presence could cleanse the wraith's soul and send her to heaven...but I supposed the risks involved were too steep. I would just have to do my best to keep my sworn pal away from the viper's fangs.

"That was quite the shock," Mika said. "Erich has talked my ear off about how charming you are, but when I first laid eyes on you, I truly thought he'd gone off and brought an alf."

"My dear brother said that?"

"That he did. Whenever we go shopping, he's always on about what you might like or what might suit you. I'm always a second priority even when I'm right there!"

Mika shook his head with a joking chuckle...and Elisa giggled too!

"But my dear brother speaks about you often as well, Mr. Mika. When he helps me with my homework, he'll teach me with methods he says he learned from you."

By using me as a conversational bridge, the two of them managed to overcome the first hurdle of apprehension and began opening up to each other. Mika readily asked Elisa to forgo any honorifics, and my sister followed suit soon after.

I won't deny that it was incredibly awkward to be the topic over which they bonded, but, well...I supposed it was fine so long as they were having fun.

[Tips] When meeting someone for the first time, it is best practice to wait to be introduced by a mutually known third party.

Fanfare of fife and drum announced the official start of the parade...but that only meant they had begun marching from the

northern castle. That area was reserved for VIPs, meaning we couldn't even get close.

Parties of well-to-do patrons each enjoyed the privacy of an open-air booth so that high-ranking officials could bring their spouses and young children to enjoy the show on an uncluttered street. Invitations were only sent to those of a certain pedigree, so I wouldn't have been able to relax enough to enjoy it even if I could've sneaked in.

That was why, when Lady Leizniz had invited us to join her, I'd put it in her ear that all the traffic there might make my shy baby sister cry. Hearing that, she had begrudgingly—and oh, do I mean *begrudgingly*—sent us along, biting her lip. I want to reiterate that we had made it out on a hair's breadth, and one wrong move could have seen us stuck in a box with all the woman's other favorites; the thought alone struck terror in my heart.

Thankfully, we instead found ourselves on a relatively uncramped corner west of the northern road. We were still in the gentrified part of town, where poorly put-together vermin were liable to be shooed away, but we were all dressed to the nines today.

Speaking of which, Mika's new robe was apparently a hand-me-down from his master. The professor had figured his old clothes would fit Mika when he was a boy, and my friend had personally retailored it a bit to not sag.

I could understand how his master felt; it was only natural to want to send one's protégé wearing something better than usual on a day of celebration. The thought of *attending* the festivities hadn't crossed Lady Agrippina's mind, let alone dressing up for the event; Mika's teacher was a shining example of normalcy to compare her against.

In all fairness, the madam's shallow understanding of holidays was less of a personal problem and more one that affected any flint-hearted methuselah, so I couldn't pin it on her specifically. Frankly, she was probably one of the better ones for having given Elisa a silver piece when we told her we'd be heading out.

"Look, here they come."

I'd hoisted Elisa back onto my shoulders to give her a better angle, and two rows of soldiers finally came into view. They were the vanguard whose job was to announce the prestigious folks that would follow: commoners couldn't identify people by armor and banner alone, and even noble children in the middle of their schooling would have a hard time without someone introducing everybody. That would reduce the whole affair to a showcase of fancy armor, which wouldn't be all that fun for anyone.

As an aside, heraldry was an art that could be even more complicated than *magic*, so I'd elected to forgo it despite how useful it

seemed. When attaining a III: Apprentice level cost as much as *seven* tiers of Hybrid Sword Arts, there was clearly something wrong.

Not that I could call foul, I supposed. The noble houses that made up His Majesty's loyal shield numbered in the hundreds, and there were all sorts of different branches for each. Mixing in the countless knight lineages and fallen houses made for an awe-inducing final total. There was more to memorize than in a long-running trading card game, so it was fair enough for the experience costs of mastery to skyrocket.

"Here comes the first of the Five Generals! Second only to the moon-eating wolves of House Graufrock, the Grauberg clan is led today by its rightful heir and successor, Sir Adalbert at the helm! Following them is..."

By my estimate, the one leading the parade was from some knighthood or other. He had a mystical contraption coiled around his neck to amplify his voice, and I could hear him clearly announce the titles and prestige of all who marched by through the hum of the crowd. They must have gathered up a lot of people to find someone with his voice and looks.

"They're coming out the gate strong," Mika said.

"Yep. A branch family of one of the imperials. Do you get it, Elisa?"

"Yes, Dear Brother. The name came up in Master's lectures."

Elisa went on to name the other Five Generals, houses that sat at the top of imperial military affairs, but all I could think about was the operatic struggles that had no doubt gone down behind the scenes to decide on this order in the parade. I was convinced that blood and gold had been spilt on the dimly lit stage of backdoor politics over which clan was to follow which other, or even who was to march at the head of each.

How refreshing it was to be in the spectator's seat, free from such strife. Truly, to stay a commoner was life's greatest blessing.

A few minutes after the vanguard had passed, a troop of warriors clad in enchanted armor—some magical, some divine—could be seen slowly making their way toward us on a flock of impressive warhorses. Their leader was a young werewolf who'd removed his helmet and held it in his armpit.

His lush mane of gray fur had been carefully groomed such that the shortened patch took the shape of an immaculate crescent moon. As a fighter myself, seeing him clad in such magnificent plate armor drove a spike of pure envy into my heart.

And he wasn't alone! More just like him followed one after another, and my high spirits finally reached their tipping point: I lost myself to the festive atmosphere, hooting and hollering like any other

child. Mika tapped into the same boyish amazement, and though the unfamiliar feelings gave him pause, he joined me soon after.

On the other hand, Elisa couldn't quite wrap her mind around what made armor so cool to us, and instead pelted me with an endless barrage of questions—you know, the sort that curious young children often ask. Things like, "What are those pointy spikes on their boots?" or, "Why are their spears so long?"

"Hark, good citizens of the capital! Next we have holy knights hailing from the Unified Pantheon of Berylin, here at the personal request of His Imperial Majesty! At the helm we see a devout follower of the God of Trials, Father Diedrich! As a member of the Great Boniface Sect, he leads..."

The infinite line of marching soldiers continued with holy knights, which included some radicals who professed their faith with swings of their swords. While religious entities usually didn't involve themselves directly with imperial politics, they could be counted on at times to declare holy wars against heretical enemies of the state.

Their inclusion was probably aimed at diplomats who hailed from lands where rivaling religions had taken hold, or missionaries that had been granted special permission to enter the country. While the Rhinian pantheon was generally rather quiet, it could completely uproot the divinity of any who opposed it; our gods of war and battle weren't known as the Barbarian Gods abroad for nothing.

"Now then, pay heed! He who shall pass now sits atop the imperial throne, leads the venerable House Baden, and rules all the Empire with infallible authority! Here comes His Imperial Majesty, the keeper of peace in the eastern land of savages, and restorer of stolen imperial glories! Here comes August IV!"

A deafening wave of cheers washed over the crowd from front to back. Who could blame them? The crown jewel of today's event—our one and only Emperor—had descended to greet us.

"Wow," I gasped. "Hey, Mika, look! That's incredible!"

"Whoa!" he shouted. "Real dragon knights! I've never seen them fly so low!"

Long hair swirled about and a few people lost their hats to the tailwind as they soared past, but not a single soul complained. Everyone on the scene simply raised their fists toward the whistling skies.

They were real *dragon knights*. The lesser drakes they rode were highly intelligent and receptive to people. We made use of their group hunting skills in battle, and they'd been considered the peak military steed for generations now. Their red carapaces showed that they came from a mountainous population comfortable with a furnace's blaze: they intuitively employed magic to fly and breathe metal-melting

flames. The most terrifying thing about their breath was that it used a biological oil as a catalyst, and it *still* shot forward when they were traveling close to the speed of sound.

If a fleet of them cut off a formation of enemy soldiers from the skies, all their tactics and stratagems would melt away faster than a candy drop. So great was their influence that military advisors of the past had once considered a nation's might to be directly proportional to their arsenal of drakes; as someone under their protection, nothing could inspire more confidence.

Nowadays, of course, advances in polemurgy and siege weaponry made their influence less absolute, but they remained a key part of turning the tides of battle. A single dragon knight was said to do the work of a whole squad of cavalry, and the Empire had *one, two, three...* Three squads of six?!

As I lost myself in the drakes gliding leisurely above, a thundering footstep that shook me to my core brought my attention back to the ground. I looked to see dragon knights *walking* down the street.

The leader of the pack was a massive plateau drake. It had a bluish carapace and much larger wings than its mountain-dwelling cousins. While it couldn't spit fire, it could summon razored gales that could score the face of a mountain. Witnessing it march on its hind legs and balance itself with the tips of its wings was equal parts terrifying and heartening.

And the man who sat atop that magnificent specimen was our Emperor: August IV, the Dragon Rider. Clad in shining white armor, he exuded too much raw virility for me to believe the man was over fifty. He stared ahead with a gaze devoid of even the faintest ounce of softness.

However, the charming old lady riding with him was quite the opposite in every way. His Majesty's unyielding vigor made him look even taller than he already was, and the Empress Consort almost looked like a floresiensis by comparison. She gratified the citizenry in place of her stark husband, and the white-haired grande dame made sure to wave to both sides of onlookers evenly.

It took a long while for anyone to follow, but eventually a young man who shared many of the reigning monarch's features appeared—probably the crown prince. I'd been too giddy about the flying drakes to pay attention to the herald.

"Weird..." Mika cocked his head as soon as the prince came into view.

"What's up, old chum?"

"I don't know. How do I put this? I've seen His Highness once, when I helped carry my master's things into the palace. But he seems so...different. Like he's less rugged, maybe? Or more at peace, or

something...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m not really sure, myself. It’s just...he wore a grimmer expression when I last saw him. His brow was just as furrowed as his father’s.”

I looked over at His Highness at Mika’s request, but all I saw was him and his werewolf princess waving to the people with bright smiles—I couldn’t even begin to imagine the scene my friend was describing. He looked like a good, amicable man that didn’t have a single care in the world.

“Hrm...” Mika groaned. “I mean...I *guess*?”

Although he didn’t seem convinced even as he spoke, all his puzzlement quickly faded away as the next part of the parade approached.

The three of us stayed to watch the parade until it ended in the evening, and went out for supper together. The two of them had gotten nice and chummy over the course of the festival, and by the end of the day, Elisa was holding my hand in her right and Mika’s in her left. It had been a good day: Elisa had taken her first step into society, as small as it was, and I had a feeling Mika was a tiny bit closer to putting the past behind him.

Ah, if only my problems were any closer to resolution.

A small thorn still pricked at my heart, but the joyful weariness of a day well spent helped soothe my soul as the day turned to night.

[Tips] The crown prince’s official duties only entail taking command when the emperor is unable to do so. However, in reality, there are examples of princes gradually being given more and more responsibilities until the reigning monarch simply abdicates to them; for someone who abhors the thought of coronation, the position is a terrible punishment.

Spring of the Thirteenth Year

PC Encounters

When a PC meets an unforeseen end or a new player joins a table mid-campaign, the party will need to take on new characters. Some bring them into the fold with a simple introductory scene, but others may opt for a full session to build a new party dynamic.

Making new friends is in many ways an adventure in and of itself.

What was this weight that rested in my palm? Was it steel? Wood? My sword? Was it someone's life, my family's future, or was it plainly me?

Sinking into deep thought when faced with a difficult question was a quirk of mine. I had originally been the type to conquer a GM's unjust challenges with pure physics—not the scientific kind—or a wily trick to weasel my way out. I had spent so much time trying to find the most efficient means of success or to otherwise make my GM groan and pull out a rulebook that contemplation had become an unbreakable habit.

Yet for all my pondering, I no longer knew whether throwing myself into the fray of adventure was good or evil.

Elisa had asked why—why did I actively advance into danger? I had not been able to answer—to explain that I danced with death to chase a dream that had taken hold a lifetime ago. I didn't see how I could. How was I meant to look my sister in the eye when she was earnestly trying to find a way for me to live safely, and tell her that I threw myself into the thick of the fight for my own gratification?

The issue was unsolvable. Elisa wasn't wrong: while I wanted to win her a life free from discrimination, I didn't have to risk my life for that future. On the other hand, I could affirm the validity of my admiration in a heartbeat. It was a childish passion that had admittedly silly origins, but my desire to set off on the same path my avatars had once taken came from the bottom of my heart.

No matter how long and hard I thought, these two ideals could not gel in my brain. Peaceful days and a life of adventure were harder to mix than oil and water; no person on the planet could solve this conundrum. I didn't need anyone to give me answers to know that there were only two choices: to prioritize Elisa's wish, or to prioritize mine.

That being said, no matter how much Elisa pleaded, I believed having some amount of strength was mandatory. Setting the talk of adventure aside, casting my lot with Lady Agrippina was like letting the cruel mistress of Fate slip a twisted wedding ring onto my finger.

My recent errand had quickly devolved from a simple task to an overtuned quest; I was sure there was more where that came from. Narrowly escaping the reaper's embrace thrice on three separate battlefields, all before coming of age, had made me certain of one thing: I could not live a harmonious life no matter how hard I tried.

This went beyond the future Buddha's blessing; at this point, I was convinced that the stars had aligned at my birth. I hadn't prayed to the heavens for a life of hardship, of course, but there was little to do if They had chosen me. Put in Rhinian terms, the God of Trials had fallen for me at first sight.

I'd learned from my time in the ichor maze that this world's GM was infuriatingly unbiased. Not only would my enemies unabashedly take time to set up on me, but sometimes the task at hand would clearly not be balanced with my victory in mind. Unlike a proper game master, this universe did not expect me to surmount all its challenges; I wanted to chip away at the possibility of dying facedown in the mud after being trampled by a streak of bad luck as much as humanly possible.

What was worse, my master was *the* Agrippina du Stahl. Although she was laying low and avoiding any public affairs for now, living in the capital meant that she was *highly* likely to drag me into some kind of disaster sooner or later. I didn't know if she'd scheme something up of her own accord or if someone would realize her utility and try to profit off her talents, but I knew it was coming. So far I'd only seen the splendiferous exterior and the well-oiled machinery of Berylin, but I knew the political center of a massive nation couldn't be all roses at its core.

The question of whether I would choose my dream or Elisa's would have to wait until I sorted out the immediate danger.

As a brother, I naturally wanted to let my precious baby sister have her way, but this was no longer just a question of me, as evidenced by the jingling pink earring's whispers: "Don't let this be a decision to regret."

What an impossible paradox. I wondered why any form of life had been trusted with even a scrap of organic tissue with the capacity to contemplate these unsolvable issues. As a great thinker whose name lamentably escapes me once said, when all was said and done, the depths of hell resided under a thin shell of bone.

It was a riddle worthy of a deity. Not just any old god either: it would need to be one so omnipotent that They'd trample all over the

contradictory word games we mortals played with. They would have to lift an unliftable boulder without violating the rock's unliftable properties; only a god who could bend logic from the inside out would be capable of— *Whoa*.

A sudden chill ran down my spine. This tingle had none of Margit's playfulness; it was the feeling of something wholly foreign, like some unknowable *thing* had been peering at me all along, and I'd happened to meet its gaze. The terrible feeling of rolling dice seized me...

And then it was gone a moment later. With it went my mental baggage, and I'd managed to ride out my temporary distress without spilling a drop of pride or water—cause enough for me to marvel at my own skill.

Now a Master of Hybrid Sword Arts and with Ideal Dexterity, I'd brought my two mainstays to the realm of Scale VIII. Combined with Enchanting Artistry, I could now balance a mug of water on the tip of my blade while my mind wandered elsewhere.

I slowly exhaled the warming morning air and flicked Schutzwolfe upward; the half-filled cup took flight, and I caught it near the end of its arc, downing the water to quench my thirst.

I'd had an inkling that I'd be able to pull it off, but actually catching a cup with the blunt of my blade was really something else. Sifting through hazy memories, I recalled scoffing at comic characters doing the same, but here I was.

Facing two conflicting ideals and choosing one to cut down was an onerous task, but slicing through physical objects was a breeze; it followed that if slashing them was easy, not slashing them was just as doable. Getting into the nitty-gritty of how a sword fulfilled its purpose would be needlessly long-winded, but suffice it to say that the wielder could dull its stopping power through technique. In an extreme case, one could smack something with the edge without leaving any incision.

In other words, *I am become the blade...*or something.

The thin layer of snow that had so obnoxiously stuck around was finally out the door as the Harvest Goddess and her bounty brought in the warmth of spring. Farmers in rural cantons all across the Empire would be running to and fro to begin the agricultural cycle anew, and wandering merchants would be peddling wares like their lives depended on it; the joyous atmosphere of the spring festival was second only to that of autumn, after all.

Which meant that it had already been a year since Elisa and I left our beloved Konigstuhl behind. *Oh, how time flies.*

Yet the glee of springtime did nothing for my dilemma. Laugh at me for my irresolute temper if you must, but the pain of choice was

not so evident until one came upon a crossroads like mine.

If only I could bring myself to throw it all to the wind.

Elisa had asked why, oh why, did I choose to do scary things. She questioned my reasons for arming myself, and begged me to stay safe by her side. After spending all winter lost in thought, I had only been able to answer one of the doubts she'd spawned with her roundabout pleas for me to quit chasing adventure: no matter what, I could not give up on combat skills.

Looking back, it was clear that none of the enemies I'd faced thus far were willing to entertain a speech check. Had I not been a skilled swordsman, I would've been buried long before I was afforded the privilege of worrying over this sort of thing.

Personal safety as a basic right was alien to this era, and the morality of harming others often boiled down to a loose "Don't do it unless nobody is looking." While the tangible presence of the gods helped to some degree, a Wild West outlook on life was impossible to rein in entirely.

To gingerly and tactically plagiarize a certain association, the only thing that stops a bad guy in armor is a good guy in armor; in this day and age, this sort of logic was plain truth. It was terrible to see from a twenty-first-century perspective, but the logic of the naked blade underpinned every band of adventurers to brave a dungeon-bashing tabletop setting.

Elisa was innocent—for better or for worse. She didn't know what malintent truly was because we, her whole family, had shielded her from it her whole life. It was only natural for a baby of nine: no child her age ought to live in fear of military power and senseless violence. The conclusions she'd come to were perfectly reasonable for a young girl.

So, if we were to assume man to be a redeemable creature, Elisa had completely bested me with her dialectic. And as an adult—under imperial standards, I was close in the physical sense too—I simply had to hold on to my beliefs and wait for her. One day, she would grow up to realize the awful implications of the disparate soul, and what it truly meant to protect another from the evils of the world.

Until then, I was to be a loving shield. I'd taken an eternity to mull my decision over, but ultimately chose the strength needed to live up to this role; my payday from the ichor maze had gone into leveling Hybrid Sword Arts and Dexterity by one each.

Please, please, there wasn't anything to worry about. People weren't so far gone that we needed bombastic drama just to grow. I hadn't ever experienced a fight in my past life, but I'd still known that the only immediate solution to someone throwing punches was to throw one back. If I had truly needed to experience that sort of life-

changing event to learn that lesson, all of humanity would have gone extinct ages ago.

That's why I was sure it would work out; I truly believed that even though I didn't have it yet, I would one day find an answer that we could both be happy with.

I wiped the sweat from my brow as I finished up my early morning training. Somewhere in the corner of my meandering consciousness, I thought, *Wait. Did I just jinx myself again?*

Suddenly, a wave of mana washed over me. I glanced over to see a tear in space—the same old spell I'd seen the madam use many times—from which a fluttering paper butterfly emerged. I found this odd: I had a short-range talisman that would let her thoughts reach me so long as I didn't leave the city. Why had she gone through the trouble of penning a letter?

“No work today,” I read aloud. “‘Stay away from the College?’”

The short note had been scratched out quickly, and the ink had yet to dry. Her penmanship was anything but pretty; she'd clearly been in a rush to get this out.

“Seriously? Isn't it a bit early for a callback?”

Perhaps I really had foreshadowed a terrible event. I mean, I knew I'd just been grumbling over the trouble Lady Agrippina was liable to cause, but *come on...*

[Tips] Jinxes (sometimes called “flags”) are statements and events that conjure up future events at disproportionately high frequencies. He who sets out to battle after seeing a child born or before marrying his beloved is almost guaranteed to die to a stray arrow; when a player rolls with the words, “Please give it to me! I just need an expected value to live!” a 2D6 will cap out around five or six.

In her 150 years of life, Agrippina du Stahl had rarely faced true hardship. Born to a politically invincible baron who commanded countless territories and had an incalculable treasury, she was an unaging methuselah with nearly unlimited mana—not to mention her eye, extraordinary even among her kind. One could only assume that she had received some sort of divine favor, and she unapologetically used her gifts to multiply her fortunes in the service of a more comfortable life.

Methuselah were of a rare temperament, in that they took no pride in their age. Although they employed it as a metric at times, never did they gloat about their long lives. They focused instead on experiences, and only brought out years lived as a bargaining chip with mortals.

After all, their glory days never waned...and they never truly grew past that point. The talented were talented from youth, and though they were all enormously powerful in the grand scheme of life, the average were doomed to be average within their kind. Experience was important, but in the end, a life-or-death battle between methuselah was almost always decided by the speed of their mental faculties.

Not even the best, most veteran driver can outrace a sports car with a minivan. Those who were truly bright simply made up for their dearth of experience with faster calculations. As such, Agrippina had never brought up her century and a half of life as a point of pride—save for when she bullied her mortal servant—and could only recall a handful of incidents in that time where she had genuinely stood on the back foot.

Perhaps her only blunder had been when she'd legitimately angered Lady Leizniz into handing her an ultimatum: fieldwork or serious combat. On that day, the sharp-witted Agrippina had hesitated until the very last moment.

No amount of cleverness could eliminate the monotony of indefinite fieldwork, especially when it also entailed leaving her treasure trove of books behind. Furthermore, if research became her only pastime, it would counterintuitively never see progress.

However, to fight the dean would be an absolutely abysmal plan: win or lose, she gained nothing in the process. If Agrippina lost, she would be at the mercy of one Magdalena von Leizniz—who, judging from her fury, was sure to be utterly ruthless. Yet if she won, the disdainful stares within her cadre would evolve into all-out hostility; not even she had the capacity to deal with that. Even with her father's support, a noble in a foreign land could only exert so much influence.

Knowing that she had no hope of escaping to another cadre, Agrippina had contemplated the two terrible options that sat at the bottom of the barrel. In the end, she'd chosen the path that left her with the possibility of a future renaissance.

Now, the dreadful punishment had passed, and her lovely indolence was once more in hand. One year was a mere blink in a methuselah's life, but this past cycle of seasons had shone brighter than the finest gem when placed against the backdrop of her twenty-year ordeal.

Agrippina had soared from rock bottom to dizzying heights, and she had no intentions of slipping up now. There would be nothing worse than to let a prized jewel slip from her fingers out of carelessness. With how well she'd done well for herself thus far, she was surely set to continue sailing smoothly now that she'd tasted failure and abandoned negligence.

Alas, a life lived on her lonesome had shaped Agrippina du Stahl's

mental framework to revolve around how her actions affected herself...but she was no longer alone. She now kept an emotionally volatile apprentice and a servant so altogether chaotic that she couldn't predict what he'd do if she left him alone. Up until now, she had tossed all sorts of things their way in the simple name of entertainment.

Finally, it had come time for her to pay the interest owed for her merriment. The world had caught up to her, declaring that none were to enjoy more luxuries than they were due.

"Ah, it is good to meet you. Please, no need to be so stiff. I am but an independent professor without any cadre to my name."

Agrippina eyed the behemoth sitting before her and pointlessly wondered how this had happened for the umpteenth time today—not that such knowledge would do her any good now.

The enormity of the man in front of her was impossible to know. This vampire had dabbled in the chessboard of politics while simultaneously *embodying* the game of imperial economics. The self-described professor was one and the same as the Bloodless Emperor of old; of all the things Agrippina had accounted for, a meeting with Duke Martin Werner von Erstreich was *not* one of them.

"Come, be seated," he said. "I may have been the one to call upon you, but the College is your domain, is it not? With your position as researcher, it would only be right for me to offer my hospitality."

"Yes, well... May I inquire as to why I was invited?"

"Please, take a seat first, madam. Wine, perhaps? I've procured a wonderful bottle from my estate. Will a red Mauser suit your palate?"



“Uh, yes.” Agrippina was stiffer than any of her usual contacts could believe possible as she planted herself on the epicurean sofa. Not only was it supremely soft, but the cushioning had been balanced to ensure the sitter’s comfort by an artisan of manic focus; yet the methuselah felt about as relaxed as she would in a torture chair lined with steel rivets.

Agrippina found herself with one of the untouchables of the College. Here was a walking landmine so dangerous that the Emperor himself had begged him, “Dealing with the different cadres is taxing enough. Please, if nothing else, keep your political sway *out* of College dealings.” *Why has it come to this?* she thought.

Duke Erstreich was known for passionately churning out treatises; he was equally famous for his patronage of scholarship, endowing those who caught his critical eye with grants and other charity. He distanced himself from the factional warfare of the College, instead proving his ardent love of knowledge by focusing on his studies.

Agrippina had awoken in the morning to another wonderful day... So why was she stuck here with this peerless eccentric? For all the times she’d forced her will onto others, this marked perhaps the first occasion on which she had no choice but to play along with the unreasonable whims of another.

“Well, let us chat for a spell before diving into the main topic,” the vampire said. “I’ve read a handful of your essays since coming across your name, and each and every one has impressed me. It must be some kind of joke that these wondrous treatises gained no traction among our peers. I at once doubted my memory, thinking that perhaps I’d simply forgotten the attention your theses received.”

“Ah, yes, well...” *Of course you haven’t seen them.*

Agrippina had written all of those papers to meet the bare minimum of her obligation, and refused to proactively generate interest by attending debates or asking for opinions. Her real research was safely hidden away, and she only intended to reveal it when she felt the time was right; everything she’d published up to this point had been carefully tweaked to be of respectable make, but no more than that.

As a result, this encounter completely blindsided her. She hadn’t accounted for the possibility that someone might whiff out her true talents from the way she wrote such safe and boring essays—or at least, she’d assumed anyone with enough eye to do so would write her off as unassuming.

The College was a nest of talented magia, and making real advances in magecraft often required unshakable beliefs and the will to prove it; most of her peers were full of themselves. Agrippina had

penned every sentence thinking that the most gifted among them would disavow her work as sarcastic humility.

Not even with all her brilliant wits about her could she have expected that someone would *appreciate* these treatises. While she'd prepared contingencies in the event that someone tried to antagonize and expel her, coming up with a plan of action for the opposite on the fly proved difficult.

"To begin, I'd like to look at this one..."

Agrippina took the transcription, and with one look she braced herself for a war of attrition. When an immortal wished to quibble over their own area of expertise, they would throw food, sleep, and all of their duties to the wayside—she, of all people, would know. Born into an absolute monarchy, the refined lady could not muster the courage to refute a man who had once borne the title of Emperor of Rhine.

[Tips] Professors who do not swear allegiance to a cadre—or otherwise lead one themselves—are exceedingly rare, but do exist. Some are best suited to solo research, others are too socially undesirable to gain allies, and others still are simply so grumpy that nobody wishes to work with them. In the rarest of cases, an individual can be so unique that the act of joining a cadre could threaten to tip the delicate balance of power, requiring them to abstain from such actions.

They say there are oddballs in this world who spend their free time actively searching for ways to make more work for themselves.

"Check."

"Argh!"

Well, if you can call *this* work, it holds for sure.

I pushed my pawn forward and knocked away the final guardsman blocking my path to the enemy emperor. Guardsmen couldn't be felled so long as they remained exactly one space in front of the emperor, but this fool had greedily leapt forward, attempting to snuff out a major piece.

"Err, wait! I didn't mean to do that!"

The old dvergar across the board—or maybe he was young? It was hard for a mensch to tell with how luscious all their beards were—twirled strands of his lengthy mane with his fingers as he groaned.

"No take-backs," I said. "Unless..."

I tapped the wooden sign on top of the table, and the man visibly hesitated for a moment before pulling out a copper quarter.

"Thanks for the business," I said, bowing politely. His frustrated groans were music to my ears as I returned the guardsman to his place

and undid the work of the pawn.

Now then...how had it come to this?

Upon being set free from all my duties beyond caring for Elisa, I'd decided to use my new leisure to engage in some business. Carving ehrengarde pieces remained a good way to earn bits of experience here and there, so I'd kept the hobby alive for years; now, I was just selling all that I'd made. Slapping a coat of cheap paint on simple wooden figurines was a far more peaceful way of earning pocket change than anything else I'd tried thus far. Saving up morsels of experience in this way had long since become a part of my daily routine, and I was finally cashing out on all the random statuettes I had lying around taking up space.

The imperial capital was a good place to sell. The low quarter had an entire section within the artisan's district dedicated to an open-air market where one could rent table space for twenty-five assarii a day. I didn't have to get permission from the local magistrate like back home, nor did I have to pay a cut to a local union or guild. While it looked like we'd manage on the tuition front, I wasn't about to say no to padding out my living expenses.

I was here, under the open sky, selling board game pieces for anything from fifteen assarii to a whole libra. The pawn was like a shogi pawn in that it could only go forward, and its only peculiarity was that three of them lined up horizontally could block leaping pieces from advancing over them; naturally, it sold for very little. However, the carefully crafted knights—pieces that couldn't be taken from the front except under very specific circumstances—were more expensive, to say nothing of the emperor and prince that were literally required to play the game. All in all, my pricing model was tried-and-true.

Still, I couldn't help myself from throwing in a fun twist: beat the shopkeeper, and you could take any one piece of your choosing. Sure, I was basically doing the same thing as that stuart that had cheated me with "five gold coins," but I was letting the challenger choose their own prize, fair and square. Aren't I magnanimous?

That said, the price of a challenge was two pieces, and any take-backs would cost another piece. The old gentleman currently at the board had bought up enough units to start his own army, making him the perfect sucker—ahem, *customer*.

I took a moment to mull over my options and pushed forward my messenger—a piece that couldn't capture others but that would bring down any opposing piece that captured it—that was collecting dust in my formation. I figured it'd be best to play reactively and bait out more enemy mistakes.

Not to brag, but I considered myself quite the ehrengarde player.

Few people had been stronger than me back home. Before leaving, I'd even beaten a local landowner who tooted his own horn about being a powerhouse in his day, with four-piece odds (meaning I had employed four fewer pieces) at that.

My Ehrengarde Knowledge was at Scale V, and I'd always been a fan of board games, so I was confident that my skill was genuinely impressive. The important thing to note was that I'd invested in *knowledge* about ehrengarde as opposed to the Ehrengarde skill. Leaving it all to my blessing in the realm of play would be no fun, now would it?

Board games are wonderful. They're a different kind of interaction from TRPGs, and differing playstyles truly express the personalities of the players who partake: when every move oozes with expression, these deep mental sports let us truly understand our opponents across the board.

Hobbies shade in the picture of life; like the tabletop adventures I'd once relished in, my journey with ehrengarde was something I couldn't let go of. Plus, if this pastime was going to give me experience and cash, there was nothing more that needed to be said.

After the man racked his brain and took back another move, I toppled my own emperor to concede. I had spied three separate occasions on which I could've turned the tables on him, but had taken pity instead; pushing for a win here would be childish.

Besides, the man's insistence on brute force had made it clear he was a sore loser. Not only was winning too much bad for business, but if he got angry and demanded a rematch on the spot—I had no rules against repeat challengers—that would cause a scene. I couldn't keep the next in line waiting, and it would be bad if he spread rumors that I was running a scam. He was such a suck—*benevolent patron* that I could hand him a free major piece and still profit, so I saw no harm in a little customer service.

"Hrm... Well, I guess I'll call it there for today."

"Thank you for the business. Have you decided which piece you'd like to take with you?"

The dvergar didn't seem wholly pleased with how things had turned out, but he ended up taking a knight that I'd spent a lot of time crafting. He hopped down from his seat—it was a normal chair, but his kind sat in them like full-height stools—and went home.

Judging from the direction he left in, I surmised that he was an artisan of some kind, here on a break from work. He could end up being a faithful regular, so I decided to go easier on him if he came back again.

"Awright, I'm next."

"Hello," I said. "Which two pieces will you be purchasing?"

The next challenger was an ogre with rolled-up sleeves. His coppery skin and red-gold hair pointed to his belonging to a tribe much farther south than the local region. A dagger sheath dangled from his waist—no dagger, of course, considering we were in the capital—so he was probably a lower-rung bravo.

“Mm,” he said, “this empress is real purdy. She’s a pricey one, but I’ll take her and that dragon knight over there. Hey, boss, make me an ogre warrior and yeoman, won’t you? I’ll be here for another four days, so get it done by then, yeah?”

Some people came by and bought into the challenge with their favorite two pieces, regardless of price; to them, the potential prize was just a bonus. As the sculptor, it was gratifying to get requests for new designs from folks who weren’t just in it for the biggest bargain.

“Then I’ll have it ready in two days from now.” *Not like I have anything else to do these days*, I internally muttered as I lined the board.

This match didn’t have any special rules, so we each took turns placing one piece each until our formations were complete. Some variations required the use of prearranged compositions, but the classic style of play included more thought, making it more fun.

“We’ll decide who goes first with these dice,” I said.

“Sure. Ooh, that’s a good one!”

He tossed a pair of six-sided dice and they both landed six-side up. I followed suit as a formality to get a two and three... *Hey, my expected value!*

“Ha ha,” I chuckled. “The first move is yours.”

“Aw yeah, let’s do this! But man, d’you make all these yourself, boss? I like collecting the cool ones, but having a whole set styled the same is real nice too.”

Like shogi, ehrengarde could not escape the fate of giving an edge to the player who moved first; it wasn’t absolute enough to say the second player was at a marked disadvantage, though, so I didn’t mind. The power of tempo only helped to shape one’s own formation to match their game plan, making it slightly easier to mount potent attacks. The rest was determined by skill, which was why I enjoyed the game so much.

Our pieces clicked and clacked without much pause; each move in a street game was only allowed ten seconds, after all.

On another note, I couldn’t help but wonder what had happened to Lady Agrippina. I was taking care of Elisa, but not even she had seen our master as of late: my sister had been sentenced to indefinite self-study, and told me, “Master hasn’t been home even once.” I couldn’t even imagine what would cause the embodiment of sloth to forsake her den for this long.

I will admit that I was taking full advantage of the opportunity to

set up this street stall and show Elisa around the city, and the like...but after *three days*, I was starting to get worried, even knowing how utterly busted that methuselah was. No matter how strong the PC, no matter how psychotically broken the enemy, people died when their time was up.

But for now, I was relishing a win. Despite starting with a solid position, the ogre played impulsively, and quickly toppled his own emperor without a single take-back. He cheerily took the empress—whose bust was seventy percent larger than the statue I’d based it off, I might add—and reminded me that he was looking forward to a purdy warrior before going off on his merry way.

I’d known that sex would sell no matter the era. Maybe if I made a few nude statues with “artistically poignant” expressions, I could...

No, no, no. This world was no stranger to beating down overt displays of sexuality, so I needed to keep myself in line. Not only that, but I would probably lose my mind if I began obsessing over how to conjure the impression of thin fabrics from solid material; I’d gotten by thus far mostly on Dexterity, but that wouldn’t suffice to reach the pinnacle of artistry. This was supposed to be an easy side venture to top off my experience points, so dedicating too many add-ons to the task would be putting the cart before the horse.

I leisurely continued playing ehrengarde and selling pieces until evening sneaked up on me: the setting sun had nearly hidden itself away behind the city’s spires. As I started cleaning up, I made plans to take a quick bath and bring Elisa out with me for dinner. She was getting accustomed to her luxurious life, but it seemed that a lowborn soul would always be more at home when eating the street foods of the common people.

I cracked my neck and was just about to close up for the day when another customer walked up to my table.

“Excuse me. Would you happen to be done for the day?” Cool and steady, the voice cut through the clamor of evening with a tone that reminded me of those sudden summer breezes that whisked away a sweltering day.

I eyed the source of the polite interruption—a priestess, her face hidden by her hood. Her robes were black—an unembellished flax—and a silver medallion hung from her neck, marking her as a follower of the Night Goddess.

The lunar mother presided over serenity, solace, and caution. She healed the weary souls who slumbered at night, promising them tranquil respite; for those who used Her veil for wicked means, She swore to mend their ways.

While not as commonly revered as the Harvest Goddess, the Night Goddess had a strong following in the Trialist Empire. Her adherents

primarily included soldiers and night watchmen, but She was also fairly popular with knights, nocturnal races, and graveyard shift workers. I didn't know anyone particularly devout to Her cause, but Captain Lambert of the Konigstuhl Watch had always considered her his patron goddess.

The people of the canton had quizzically joked, "*That terrifying bastard worships the Mother Goddess?*" but we were far removed from the days of honorable formations in war. When nighttime raids and assaults at dawn were common practice—both on the giving and receiving ends—mercenaries were sure to love Her tender embrace on the same level as the God of Trials.

I glanced up at the sun; it was high enough to warrant one more game. The sheer number of pieces meant that a long session of ehrengarde could last a whole day, but it was typical for a quick match to end within half an hour. She'd gone through the trouble of coming, so I thought it fair to call her my last patron of the day.

"I still have time," I said. "Would you like to buy a piece? Or perhaps you're here for a game."

Her face was unnaturally shadowy, even with the setting sun—her clothes were likely blessed with some kind of divine protection, and I couldn't tell what face she might've made at me. She took a seat without saying a word. Then, pulling out a silver piece, she picked up a watchman and flag bearer like she'd been eyeing them all along.

The watchman was a terribly eccentric piece that was invincible so long as it did not move from its starting square; I'd modeled the one she'd taken after an old man sitting in a chair, keeping a lookout at night with a spear in hand. The flag bearer had the unique ability to allow the pieces to its left and right to advance forward alongside it once per game; it, too, was incredibly idiosyncratic, and could make or break a match depending on how it was used.

This priestess had a rather acquired taste. Both of her selections were difficult enough to use that they were considered litmus tests of a player's skill. Back in my early days of playing, I'd struggled to make them work, and they'd caused me many a headache when on the other side of the board. I couldn't even count how many times my final push had been stopped dead in its tracks by an impenetrable watchman or a flag bearer's charge plowing through my defense. We didn't have many ways to pass time in the countryside, so there had been plenty of master tacticians offering to play at the local plaza.

We pieced together our starting lineups, keeping one eye on each other's selections, and it was impossible to tell who was better off by the time we were done. Personally, I preferred to keep my openings malleable and tailor them to my opponent; apparently, she was much the same.

However, I'd split my emperor and prince to afford myself more defensive opportunities (as I could take the emperor off the board on my own turn to promote the prince). My opponent had elected to place her emperor on the front lines with an empress (who gave the emperor the movement of a knight) in order to rush me down, with her prince tucked away for safekeeping.

Hmm... How do I put this? It sort of felt like a battle between sixteenth-century and eighth-century strategies. It was like seeing an undying hero lead his army into battle with nothing more than his own personal might to back his confidence.

We rolled the dice to determine turn order, and my luck wasn't as good this time: snake eyes. Without a moment's delay, she pushed a pawn forward. *What a fast player.*

Click, clack, click, clack. The steady tempo of pieces thumping onto the board continued under the reddening sky. Merchants who'd closed up shop, passersby who were drawn in by the pleasing sound, and lovers of the game who'd happened upon our bout by chance all gathered around, forming a small crowd around our board.

From the very first move, she'd placed her pieces without a shred of hesitation, only taking a handful of seconds for each maneuver. Even with my Independent Processing running at full throttle, keeping up with her was a serious challenge.

This wasn't a blitz game or anything, so I didn't *have* to match her pace. I was speeding up for my pride's sake alone.

I mean, there were almost ten people watching our match; there was nothing lamer than to back down here. The fear that I might blunder at any moment kept me anxious beyond belief, but I was determined to see this through.

From what I could tell, she wasn't a natural-born multitasker. I'd played with the madam when the game tickled her fancy every so often, and the priestess was nowhere near that level. While she wasn't making any outright mistakes, I noticed a handful of moves that could carry negative implications for her in a few moves' time.

A real methuselah would be in a different league. I'd once played Lady Agrippina with eight-class odds—that is, she'd been down eight *classes* of pieces—and still suffered a total defeat. If I were up against a monster like that, I wouldn't last more than five minutes at this pace before my whole board crumbled.

This priestess was simply the type to play her best at rapid speeds. I'd run into a fair share of these sorts: deep calculations just got their wires crossed, so they left the decision-making to their guts. They were usually on the weaker end, but every so often, a player could pose a real threat with sheer instinct.

Now on her final push, she used her flag bearer with a knight and

emperor at its wings to charge past my wall of pawns in a glorious assault. She blew past my fortress of pieces; only a guardsman remained to protect my emperor. It seemed the end was near...but alas, she hadn't been able to outrun the consequences of her berserk pace.

Before she could deliver the finishing blow, I let my emperor cede, promoting my prince on the other side of the field. My guardsman quickly fell without its liege, but it didn't matter; her advancing emperor still had to get through a messenger to reach my new monarch, and the rules prevent any emperor from killing a messenger.

That one turn's delay was all I needed. My prince still had an escape route, and she had no choice but to give chase if she wanted any hope of victory: her emperor abandoned the knight that had escorted it into my territory. I just needed to encircle her leader and the game would be set.

"Oh," she said, voicing her surprise coolly.

She must have spotted the castle I'd prepared a few squares away. An emperor or promoted prince adjacent to a castle could swap places with it, and my prince was going to arrive at safety sooner rather than later. It had been a point of interest in the early game when tucked in next to the emperor, but I suspected keeping an eye on it as the tides of war changed had proved challenging.

This kept my monarch alive for an extra round of play, giving my other pieces a chance to abuse the cracks in her formation. Not willing to let her emperor fall, she had no choice but to put an end to her offensive. Naturally, this play alone wouldn't lead to a direct checkmate, but...

"...It seems that would be the game," she said.

And so it was. While she could still abdicate with her emperor, her previous overextension left too many vulnerable points in her position; regrouping would take a lot of effort, and I wasn't going to sit around and let her take it easy. If she tried to go all-in on the attack and press for my prince, her other pieces were too far removed to support the emperor, and she was sure to come up just short.

The existence of a prince in addition to the emperor may seem like a flaw that would drag out games, but ceding the throne in a losing board state was almost always the same as admitting defeat anyway. Funnily enough, it was as if the game itself warned its participants to not let a successor's existence be cause for one to rest on their laurels.

"A fine game." The priestess's dainty fingertips pushed the emperor off its balance. Both the emperor behind enemy lines and the prince cornered with nowhere to go fell to the board alongside their clever schemes. Alas, such was often the fate of would-be heroes and

legends.

As the curtains closed on our bout, the onlookers applauded and immediately began a postmortem, as hobbyists are wont to do. Someone reached in from the side and recreated the exact board state from seventeen turns ago, and the audience began to argue amongst themselves over such things as, “This must be where victory was sealed,” or “No, no, you could certainly see it a few steps prior.”

“Are you here always?” The priestess seemed uninterested in the spectators and rose from her seat, plucking the two pieces she’d purchased off of the board. She was totally unfazed, even when the crowd complained that they needed those pieces to continue their analysis.

“Well,” I answered, pulling out extra pieces to appease the others, “whenever I have time. I can’t promise that I’ll be here tomorrow, but I plan to be around for the near future.”

“I see. In that case, I pray we might enjoy another bout sometime.”

I motioned for the others to open a path, and she quickly exited the scene.

...Boy, I’m tired. Spending fewer than five seconds per move really strained my mental faculties. At least Lady Agrippina had always woven in long spells of deep thought at times—not to say that I ever survived a well-planned move from the woman, but still. To think I’d be more tired now than when playing a *methuselah*.

Hey, wait a second. I summoned up my character sheet and checked my stats. *Wow, that’s a lot of experience. I could get a minor trait with that.*

Pleased with the multifaceted payday, I watched the excited mob chatter on and on about our game. *I wonder when they’re going to be done...*

[Tips] Anyone can play ehrengarde, so long as a few basic pieces are available, making it a well-loved game in an entertainment-impooverished age. The majority of imperial citizens know how to play, and the low up-front cost of a simple set combined with the lack of upkeep makes it a mainstay in the realm of recreation.

On the other end of the spectrum, some immortals dedicate their eternities to learning the intricacies of the art, and will even offer rewards for strong players to share experiences with them over the board. The top contenders can go around hunting these bounties to make a living as true professionals, and the best of the best even receive salaried sponsorships to stay at their estates as personal practice partners.

I was employed by a woman who I obviously didn't want dying on me, but who was sure to throw all manner of commotion my way if she remained alive. To not know whether to wish for her safe return was my eternal struggle.

Much to my surprise, Lady Agrippina was nowhere to be seen after half a month. Elisa received instructions on what to read, write, or recite by way of origami butterfly; she was still alive, but she hadn't returned to her atelier this entire time.

Curiously enough, no amount of head-scratching allowed either me or Elisa to make any form of contact with her. We didn't have an address to which we could send letters, and the madam had left the receiver for my Voice Transfers in the lab.

To top it all off, we'd visited the seamstresses' yesterday and mustered the courage to ask Lady Leizniz about the situation. Her response had been, "I suspect she is taking a dose of medicine long overdue," complete with singsong timbre and a perfectly set smile.

I'd instantly realized the dean had been behind it all, and the thought was frightening like no other. Lady Leizniz's beaming smile had surely been the product of more than our cosplay session. I refuse to dwell on the other details of the occasion any further. That maniac had tried to get me to cross-dress—and not just in any old dress either. Any fool could have clocked me at first glance! I knew that souls were twisted by hatred as part of a wraith's rebirth, but I couldn't help but feel as if her personality had been perverted in a different way.

I'd refused, to be clear. My stores of pride were close to bottoming out, but I refused to give up my last shred of integrity, no matter how fruitful the trade turned out to be. If I'd caved there, the only thing left to sell would be my actual ass.

Leaving the substance of decades of therapy sessions sure to come aside, I was once again posted up at the open-air market. Even after the rental fees, I pocketed an average of four or five silver pieces a day; unfortunately, my stock of figurines was disappearing as quickly as my pride.

Come night, I used all my Hands in parallel to mill out four separate carvings at once to churn out experience, but the most labor-intensive pieces still took two hours to finish. Polishing up a figure and painting it took another hour. My production process couldn't keep up with demand.

As I pondered whether I ought to shelve the shop for a while to focus on building up my stock, she appeared again. Draped in the same hooded robe as at our first meeting, the priestess always showed up as the sun and moon shared a fleeting moment in the heavens.

"You're here today," she said. "Shall we play?"

“Yes, of course.”

And, as was a matter of course by now, we began moving our pieces at a brisk pace. I presently held the lead with four wins and two losses, but every single victory had been hard-fought. This game got harder and harder as your opponent learned your habits, and I suspected our head-to-head would trend closer to even the more games we played.

The clicks and clacks went back and forth with musical rhythm, and the falling pieces changed the board with every beat. Deciding what to sacrifice, save, and take in mere seconds was a daunting task; yet for all the consequence a single mistake could carry, the stress of playing was of a very pleasing sort.

I wondered what sort of person this priest was. I'd heard many a clergyman partook in the game in between their pious duties, but I found it odd that she always arrived at this hour. Most activities venerating the Night Goddess began around this time, yet she came to visit nearly every day. Considering she also checked in on days I wasn't present, she wasn't an average grunt in charge of handling busywork...

Whatever the case, our relationship began and ended with the conversations of make-believe war that we shared over the board. Prying into her personal history would be uncouth; it wasn't as if blue blood was going to let her pawns beat my knights, anyhow.

Oh, the placement of that nun—a piece that couldn't make captures but could sacrifice itself to shield an adjacent ally—is *obscene*. Wanting to go on the offensive today, I'd marched my emperor into enemy lines; she was making full use of her defensive arsenal to stifle my momentum. I could trade the guardsman accompanying my emperor for her nun, but that exchange would lose me material...and my other pieces weren't quite in range to help.

If only this adventurer were one space farther forward... In exchange for pawn-level mobility that made them dead pieces in attacks, adventurers could be replaced on my own side of the board after being taken. Had it been in position, I would have gladly sacrificed it.

Argh! The magus waiting in her back ranks now pushed into an infuriating space. Magia could forgo movement to take pieces one tile removed, and now that it had posted up, my army's movements were severely restricted. *My attack...*

Nipped in the bud, my offensive ultimately came up one step short, and I had no choice but to concede. Thinking about how I'd committed too many major pieces to pick off her prince in the midgame made me groan. If I'd still had a knight, or better yet, a dragon knight—a one-of that everyone used that could move in any direction for any length and leap over a single defender—left over, I

could have promoted my prince and had some hope of resetting the board for a win.

“Am I mistaken, or did you hold back?” With her prize of a vampiric empress in hand, the priestess seemed uncharacteristically displeased as we opened up our postmortem.

“You didn’t give me any room to go easy,” I answered.

Hearing my response, she deftly rearranged the board to its positions some fifty turns prior, and made a few hypothetical moves to show a future that we had not encountered.

“Would your pawn not have reached my emperor if you had pushed it here?”

“Yes, but, well... Taking an emperor with a *pawn* is...”

The southern regions of the Empire abided by an unwritten rule that letting a pawn cut down an emperor was simply too crass to be allowed. Putting the ruler in check with a pawn was fine, but we held on to the desire for our monarchs to meet a beautiful end at the blade of a worthy opponent. For mate to be delivered by a foot soldier’s hand was considered hideously base.

That evidently was not the case here, but I couldn’t shake off the customs of my hometown. The tabletop munchkin in my heart whispered with bloodshot eyes that I ought to just pull the trigger, but my romantic side implored me to uphold beauty and honor; when it came to ehrengarde, the latter won out.

“I suppose if that is how you play, then there is nothing to be done...” Her tone suggested she wasn’t as understanding of my decision as she let on, and she rose from her chair with these rather unholy words. “But the distinction of rank means nothing in the face of death.”

Er, actually, maybe her statement was the epitome of piety? Regardless, her no-holds-barred philosophy clashed with her refined speech and mannerisms in a frightening way. I knew a dagger was ever a dagger no matter if its wielder was lay or noble, and that one good stab could bring most living creatures to their end. But as a peon like any other, I couldn’t help but wish for the emperor who reigned up high to keep his chest puffed all the way to the grave. How could we ever *want* the person who decided on the future of our nation to die a piddling death?

“I bid you good day...and make sure not to count this in our score.”

I had just been mentally tallying a four-to-three total history when she made her demand and left. Getting away when I had a clear path to victory had really gotten to her. Personally, I didn’t see the problem with chalking one up on her side to my own player error, but...

Actually, no, what surprised me the most was that she’d been

keeping track at all. For all the games we'd played, she'd never once shown any concern over the outcome of a match. Despite her class, she had a bit of a childish side to her; I rudely smiled at her cute attitude as she receded from view.

[Tips] “No pawn mates” is a popular rule in southern Rhine, in large part because the Emperor of Creation was born in the region. While checks are allowed, checkmates are considered distasteful. Imperial political scientists often cite this as an example of the Empire’s strong national zeitgeist: love for the Emperor permeates even the recreational pastimes of the lower castes.

The rift between mortal and immortal is impossible to bridge. Of all their differences in value, the deepest divide is that of what life is. This is not merely to say that the undying are more patient or that they are prone to more complacency; their attitudes regarding economies of time are mutually exclusive.

Although mensch sometimes forgo proper sustenance and sleep in favor of their favorite activities, they cannot avoid consumption or excretion as a whole, and some degree of rest is required for them to enjoy their pastimes to their fullest. Carried to the logical extreme, they live for life’s sake, and every other activity is accessory to that goal; after all, no superfluous pursuit can make headway if the bare minimum requirements needed to stave off death are not met.

However, the same cannot be said of immortals.

Methuselah do not have to eat or drink, and vampires can power through the pangs of hunger to relinquish their sole source of nutrition—blood—without keeling over. Furthermore, their natural talents most often converge on some fixation or other: in the end, life becomes accessory to whatever mode of recreation they choose.

Perhaps the most well-known example would be that of ehrengarde connoisseurs. Once obsessed with an art, undying beings will dedicate the whole of their eternal existence to it. The better part of undertakings cannot be completed alone: even the solitary crafts of painting or poetry require editors or trusted critics to polish the work before it enters the public eye.

Thus, one must ask, what would an immortal hobbyist do when stumbling upon a person that can help hone their craft or with whom they can share their passions? They try to drag them into it, of course—to make them squander any and all free time chasing the same dragon.

It is here that the gulf between life lived for life’s sake and life lived as an afterthought becomes abundantly clear. Immortals

gleefully take in their favorite lesser beings in an attempt to share their interests with the poor souls. Ehrengarde lovers are infamous for latching on to choice players and never letting go: they pay exorbitant sums in order to ensure that the masters of their hobby can devote every drop of attention to furthering their own skill.

It ends ever in tragedy. Fleeting life-forms dabble in the arts as a way of giving their existences greater luster; scarce few individuals truly dedicate *everything* to a calling. They marry, have children, and give birth to things more important than mere vocations before they inevitably pass away.

Immortals cannot fathom this so-called “normalcy.” The two walks of life are simply that different in every way, shape, and form.

“And so, madam, as we know it possible to open a space between two locations through which objects can be transferred, I see no reason as to why we should be unable to filter what may pass through. The formulae required to restrict teleportation to biological matter may be all but alien to modern magic, but we know they exist. If we therefore form a barrier of tubular shape...”

Faced with a handsome man in the absolute best of spirits, a methuselah scoundrel wondered to herself how many days it had been; yet even in spite of losing track of time, her razor-sharp mind continued to whiz at full speed. Living with frail mortals that could die if she so much as glanced away had caused her to begin using day-night cycles as valuable measurements of time as of late. Had she been the same old Agrippina of yore, this conversation would be fated to never end.

“You mean to suggest that we construct a space-bending rift on one end that specifically filters away air, I presume?”

“Yes! You’re a bright one, madam! That’s exactly it! And by employing anti-gravity magic to ‘drop’ the ship sideways, we ought to achieve forward movement without need for propulsion, all free from air resistance. Am I not a genius?! Should we set a regular route with this technology, the airship will be the fastest mode of transport in all of history!”

“A wonderful idea indeed, Duke. The only hiccup would be that one thousand magia of our caliber would still lack the mana to power such an endeavor.”

How long had she discussed these pointlessly unattainable theories detailing pointlessly advanced engineering in pointlessly precise detail in service of a pointlessly high-minded ideal with this pointlessly energetic man?

Methuselah were a people who, in theory, did not need the concept of time to structure their lives. But to relinquish food and sleep in favor of endless debate and mystic experimentation screwed

with even Agrippina's internal rhythm.

While she couldn't write off the conversation as boring by any metric, her time here was undeniably taking its toll. Sitting face-to-face with a man that could easily kill her in the societal sense and could probably do the same in a physical one did not rub her the right way.

Worse still, the former emperor constantly barraged her with topics that prodded at her interests in a crafty attempt to draw more comments out of her. Agrippina hated the man's silver tongue, but couldn't afford the rudeness of silence with a person of his standing—which was also the reason she had yet to cut him off and ask when they were going to get to the real meat of the conversation.

After debating several magical theories for long enough to wither anyone's perception of time, the vampire slapped his thigh and beamed at her with a vivacious smile.

"My goodness," he said, "this has truly been a fruitful discussion. You see, I simply cannot help myself when an unsolved problem is left dangling before me."

Flaws with the current airship design had dominated a large part of their discussion. The original theoretical proofs had been published fifty years prior, and the *Jadwiga* had taken to the open skies only to crash after being attacked by fledgling drakes a piddling thirty years ago. The second ship, the *Kriemhild*, had been run aground during a stable low-altitude test by a flock of drakes and griffons. This recent disaster lingered in the memory as a testimony to the difficulty inherent in even the slightest defiance of gravity.

The Empire required a reliable means of flight. An airship needed the ability to protect itself from exterior threats and complete its voyage without outside support; a vessel was only worth anything if it could make it there and back again in one piece.

Alas, this proved a difficult objective. People had been made to toddle around on the dirt, and to forsake their initial design was to take on challenges greater than one ought to bear. In response, the good duke had initially considered the possibility of employing a barrier of space-bending magic or some sort of short-range physical separator.

Agrippina had been introduced to him as an expert on the subject, so he'd brought up his ideas with no more intent than to get a second opinion before touching on more serious matters. He'd planned to quickly—by immortal metrics—move on, but lost himself in the exciting conversation and totally forgot about his original reason for being here. This was in spite of his retainer begging him to come out already from beyond the door—the poor servant had been reduced to waiting *for* his master rather than *on* him.

“Yes, well...” Agrippina paused, savoring her relief that the end was in sight. “I suppose these treatises penned with my meager wits have served some use if they were enough to entertain you, Professor.”

“Please, there’s no need for modesty, madam. Truly, I find it peculiar that you and your exceptional talents have been buried beneath the rabble all this time.”

As if to smother Agrippina’s returning tranquility, the duke gathered the scattered essays and ran his fingers across the covers. His beauty was intoxicating as he lovingly gazed at the works.

“An analysis of the foundational correlation between heat dispersion and magical augmentation. A critique of the Fifth Axiom for its inconsistencies with space-bending magic, and a subsequent proposal of nonaxiomatic theory. A proof to allow both space-time degradation and dilation to theoretically coexist... Each and every one touches on a topic that a scholar could spend a lifetime researching. For these wonderful subjects to be confined to short-form essays is a shame like no other.”

The vampire sighed with such passion that it transcended the realm of lust to attain new heights of sensuality. Noticing his shift in demeanor, the scoundrel realized, *Oh. Not good*, and instinctively began weaving a teleportation spell.

Unfortunately, Agrippina was a few moments too late.

“This must be fate,” Martin said. “Worry not, for I shall endorse your rise to professorship using my name! I have no doubt you suffered many an injustice as the daughter of a foreign house, but those days are over! You have the Erstreich Dukedom at your back now—this boorish title will see some good use yet!”

The morally bankrupt methuselah felt as though she could hear something very important shatter into a million pieces.

To begin with, she had remained a researcher thus far of her own volition: she was free from the tedious responsibilities of professorship, and her subordination to Leizniz had meant none would approach her in the hopes of stirring up a new cadre. On the flip side, she enjoyed privileges beyond those of a student, which she used to further what research piqued her interests and read forbidden tomes in the library. She had no need for funds thanks to her family, so being a researcher offered her the most freedom to advance her research.

Agrippina did not need prestige; she already had money; glory was a laughable motivator. This incorrigible nature of hers had been the very reason a woman of her marvelous talents had lazily played second fiddle to a vitality-loving wraith.

“No, in fact, it would be a waste to shelve a brilliant mind like

yours away in the realm of academia. You would make for a wonderful advisor to my daughter... Shall I create a new position in the palace?"

Agrippina could hardly even imagine how many rules and customs he would need to trample over to get his way, but for a brief moment, a voice in the back of her mind whispered that it knew how she could get hers: *if I kill this fool and run, maybe it will all be swept under the rug...*

...It probably won't, Agrippina's waning sanity grumbled back. *No, it definitely won't.*

As she resigned herself to her fate, she could hear that sickly wraith's scornful laugh echo in the depths of her heart.

[Tips] Researchers at the College all dream of writing a masterwork essay that will gain the attention of all their peers and send the world of academia into a mad frenzy—which is practically the only hope of receiving a letter of recommendation for promotion. This also means that a person who goes out of their way to hide their accomplishments should, by all accounts, never receive an opportunity to climb the ladder.

Late Spring of the Thirteenth Year

Accepting Quests

Quests are not simply laid out by the GM to the players, but introduced to the PCs in ways that let the party decide whether to participate or not, or to what degree they want to help the quest giver.

However, frequent exposure to danger can cause players to shy away from riskier ventures, causing stories to go untold and drawing an early, boring curtain on the party's tale.

I liked many things about the Trialist Empire, but one of my absolute top picks would have to be the lack of an obnoxious rainy season. With the delightfully dry summer right around the corner, I had completely given up on worrying about my employer.

Lady Agrippina still kept in touch. Her instructions to Elisa about homework never ceased, and she made sure to leave any necessary money on her desk for us to take, so she was verifiably alive and well—er, she was still *alive*.

I still had no idea what had actually happened to her, but seeing Lady Leizniz going about her business as jubilation personified was proof enough that whatever fate had befallen the madam was unspeakably horrific.

I was running bets in my mind on what sort of mess Lady Agrippina had gotten herself into, complete with winning odds:

- i. A powerful authority had captured her and was putting her through the wringer for her disregard for every rule in the book. One-point-one-two odds.
- ii. Relatives from her motherland had come to visit with all sorts of family drama (like an arranged marriage). One-point-seven-five odds.
- iii. The Empire was employing her as an expert for a secret project and had confined her for the duration of her service. Three-point-six odds.
- iv. Some gentleman or another was chasing her around out of love. Twelve-point-four odds.

There wasn't much to it, but personally, I was gunning for either ii or iv. I would enjoy nothing more than to see that loathsome creature chained by the collar of marriage. Think about it: the sight of that woman scowling in bridal uniform would make for the perfect

blackmail, and double as an unforgettable moment to look back upon whenever I needed a hearty laugh.

Of course, that required the unlikely event that there was a man somewhere on this planet that could rein in that utter beast, but still. Putting my tasteless mockery aside, I'd taken some time off from running my street stall to replenish my wares, and I finally had a solid-enough stockpile to warrant opening up again.

"Boy, the weather's perfect for business today."

"You've got that right, Mika."

The only difference was that today, I had my old chum sitting beside me.

While I'd been working on my products, he'd complained about having trouble with sculpting fine metal ornaments. Aesthetics were an integral part of architecture: one could get away with boring and pragmatic designs in times of need, but a proper building was meant to please the eye. Symbolic patterns and stone statues to serve as watchmen were indispensable for a complete work.

As an oikodomurge hopeful, he'd been told to practice until he could make something of respectable make; as it turned out, that was easier said than done.

Mika certainly had artistic talent, especially when drawing buildings or blueprints. Having seen some of the sketches he made on used scrap sheets, I was sure he could run a small business as a street artist if he got his hands on some real paper.

However, he discovered that his talents in rendering architecture on paper did not translate to proficiency with three-dimensional bodies. When he tried to sculpt a gargoyle meant to decorate the corner of a roof as a gutter, his attempt had amounted to a mushy facsimile of the original model.

When he showed me, the palm-sized lump of clay had been...well, it wasn't an idol of an evil god or anything, but it reminded me of a kid's toy that might come attached to a magazine subscription. I could still see the vision, but the shaping was a bit off at every corner, and he clearly hadn't been sure where to add definition and where to smooth things out; it had all the detail of a felt doll.

My idea to help my struggling friend was to show him my homemade ehrengarde pieces. I figured it would be easier to take note of his own mistakes if he had the original on hand to compare his work to, and if we bought some used scrap metals, he could wrap the foils around the figures to get a more intuitive understanding of their composition.

This plan worked wonders. It had been a long road, seeing as how Mika had churned out a few dozen more failures—we had to turn them back into malleable clay with magic every time—but by the end,

he'd been creating proper eye candy.

As we practiced, I'd thought to myself that all this time, effort, and mana would go to waste if we didn't earn a bit of profit on the way. And so, Mika plus Erich had birthed a set of *metal* ehrengarde pieces. They weren't solid metal, but rather plated versions of my wooden statuettes. They were also all fully painted, so my new lineup was far more stylish than the old woodworks I'd been selling.

I'd thought to peddle these on Mika's behalf to help my buddy pay their College fees, but they insisted on not letting me do all the work of running the stall, so here they were. As a result, the two of us were both getting ready for a day of selling board game pieces.

Mika was a strong enough player to hold their own against me, so this meant we could hustle twice as many customers as before. According to them, there were oodles of master players in the North on account of everyone being snowed in all winter, every winter. As a child, they'd played with their parents and siblings until the pieces began to wear. I could see why they'd said, "I'm pretty familiar with the game"—big words for someone who was always so humble.

As we lined up our two tables next to each other—selling as a pair also meant we had to rent a pair of permits—Mika began to mumble anxiously.

"I'm kinda worried they won't sell... We jacked up the prices a lot."

"Don't worry about it, old chum. Look how glorious these are."

I picked up a piece and felt the cool metal on my fingertips. Playing with it to show its silvery gloss, it looked like a real knight had been shrunk down to the size of my palm. Not only was he clad in plate armor, but even his trusty steed was fully equipped; with a piece this heavily clad, no pawn would ever take him down—the rules be damned. They were expensive to produce and we were selling them for five librae a pop, but I was sure we'd clean house.

Lovers of ehrengarde were mostly also lovers of collection. Lining up their favorite troops and telling the stories of where they got them was a frequent diversion during postgame analyses.

"They'll sell," I assured them. "Personally, I'd want a whole set of pieces like these."

I placed my lips on the realization of our craftsmanship and flashed Mika a smile to try and calm their nerves, but for whatever reason, all I got in return was a dubious stare.

Wh-What? Did I do something? Maybe I tried a bit too hard to be cool...

"It's just...you're not that convincing when you have something that'll *definitely* sell out on the table next to mine..."

With a sulking tone, Mika's gaze drifted over to the items I'd

created on my own time: the Smokeshow Army series.

“No, uh, this isn’t—hey, wait! Don’t act like you weren’t on board with this!”

“Yeah, when I was a *boy*! But now that I have my wits about me, this is scandalous! Look at how much leg she’s showing!”

Back when I’d fulfilled my promise to the ogre to carve up a purdy ogre warrior, a handful of other customers who’d seen the piece asked me to make them something similar. Men lusted no matter the day or age, it seemed, and my realization that figures of stimulating women were quick to sell had soon gotten the better of me.

I’d made a knight whose garments only covered her chest and hips, leaving the underside of her breasts, her stomach, and her limbs at the mercy of the elements; a dragon knight who playfully coiled her legs around a massive drake’s neck; a messenger who ferried her correspondence in an absolutely monumental bosom.

I had given form to every fleshly idea I could come up with, and before shifting back to agender, Mika had been all for it. In fact, he’d given me suggestions for new boneheaded motifs; talking shop as one of the boys again for the first time in a long while had gotten to my head, and I’d mass-produced a whole series of the things.

I’d made a pawn wearing armor too big for her, exposing her legs; an empress in sensationally thin silk, crossing her legs atop her throne with ostentatious flair; an archer who—oh, what was I even thinking with this one—let her bow dig into her chest to accentuate her body lines. One glance at any of them was enough to uncover the proclivities of their creator, and here lay an entire army of them...

My subsequent attempts to win back my friend’s respect failed spectacularly, and I began the workday with a cloud over my head. *Dammit... You’re an accomplice! Why do you get a free pass just because your sex changed?!*

Mood aside, however, our business went swimmingly. The metal pieces were selling at a good pace, and we found our demographic with show-offs who were looking to splurge.

Admittedly, Mika had been right: the Smokeshow Army sold out almost instantly, and I had a mountain of requests for new designs to build. All the disgusted stares from the good women of town did hurt a tiny bit—oh, say, just as much as stepping straight on top of a D4.

But other than my mental damage and the litany of failed social conduct saving throws, business was booming. Mika’s tight schedule and budget wouldn’t allow us to do this every day, but by my estimate, we could make around fifty librae a month like this; skill truly was man’s greatest ally in his time of need. I was once again reminded how my father from a lifetime ago had told me to study, his constant refrain that, if nothing else, an education would never be a

detriment.

We continued making sales in between grinding challengers to dust, and I could feel my brain tiring out by evening. I stretched, loosening up my tightened muscles as I stalled closing up for the day. The girl more interested in games than pieces had failed to show up. It wasn't as if we had a spoken friendship, and I'd taken some time off, so it was only natural for her not to be around.

Still, I couldn't deny that I'd been looking forward to playing that worthy rival of mine; Mika had been curious to see how they'd stack up against her too. For all the profit we made—the Smokeshow Army raked in almost five librae on its own—it was a disappointing end to the day.

No matter how populous the capital was, most of its citizens were day dwellers. As the sun careened toward the horizon, our fellow merchants packed up one after another until we followed suit. All we had left was a plain set of tables and chairs and one set worth of ehrengarde pieces, so the cleanup was easy.

We needed to stop by my house to stash away our earnings and tools, but after that, I thought it might be nice to grab Elisa and go to the public bath with the three of us. Our payday meant we could afford a nicer bathhouse for the night.

My sister was more used to Lady Agrippina's personal tub complete with scented oils than a public space, but I was sure she'd still have fun. She was still little enough to take into the men's side with us, so we wouldn't have to worry about her getting lost.

"A bath sounds nice," Mika agreed.

"Right? Which one should we go to? I'm thinking that we can afford to splurge."

"I'd rather keep the bath simple and eat a nice meal, personally."

The heft of my purse put me in a cheery mood, and we happily gabbed about our plans as we turned into an alleyway that served as a shortcut home. Suddenly, a peculiar sound caught our attention. Foot traffic had abandoned this back alley, so it was coming from somewhere else...from *above*.

A high-pitched clattering interspersed with the sound of something breaking: somebody was running across the shingles on the rooftop.

It went without saying that it was out of the ordinary for someone to walk on top of the roofs in the capital. Every now and again, a light-footed stuart or someone naturally capable of mystic flight like a siren would do so out of laziness, but the risk of property damage meant that the city guard was quick to shout them down.

I won't lie: the clusters of tall buildings did make it enticing to jump from rooftop to rooftop like a hooded assassin, but it really did

cause trouble, so the good boys and girls at home would do well to not try for themselves. Shingles were surprisingly expensive to manufacture, and repairing something that high up cost an exorbitant fee; anyone who broke them could kiss their wallet goodbye.

What all of this meant was that anyone who rushed across rooftops was sure to be a walking problem magnet to be avoided at all costs. Whether it was a turf war between thugs or a frantic chase between secret agents, the situation was certainly not something I would benefit from sticking my head into.

Thankfully, the sound was a block or so away. All we had to do was shut up and wait for it to pass. As if on cue, Mika and I looked at one another and nodded in unison without a word. After slogging through the ichor maze together, we'd learned an unforgettable lesson that loomed over our collective consciousness: stay as far from danger as humanly possible.

In perfect sync, we hid in the shadows of a stack of wooden crates by the side of the walkway and waited for the footsteps to pass. Just in case, we poked our heads up to keep an eye out...

Huh. The sound is getting closer. This is unlucky, even for me...

I prayed that they wouldn't come toward us, and my prayer was sort of answered: the footsteps were approaching from the top of the building opposite us. At this rate, they'd most likely jump clear over our alleyway and onto the rooftop behind us.

Yes, keep going! I don't know what your deal is, but so long as you don't stop now...

The next instant, the catastrophic sound of a shattering shingle filled my ears. Municipal services paid for the upkeep of the capital's architecture to keep up appearances, but the finite budget couldn't cover every forgotten roof that faced a desolate alleyway. Years of neglect had left several unseen spots in Berylin weak and rotting.

Whoever this mystery person was, their luck was even worse than mine. The final, most important step before leaping across the gap had been the one to snap a derelict shingle. As it exploded underfoot, the shards scattered and revealed the silhouette of a person falling with the blazing sunset at their back.

Oh, they're going to die.

The person was falling upside down—a mensch's center of gravity was toward the head, so it took technique to fall upright. I wove together my Unseen Hands out of pure reflex. They were some thirty meters away: well within reach. My fleet of appendages grabbed onto shoulders, thighs, and hips, slowly decelerating them to land without injury.

My artificial sense of touch brought back a bewitching softness; I had to fight off my instinctive desire to let my fingers sink in for more.

Give me a break, okay?! I was stuck in the body of a middle schooler!

No, forget it. More importantly, what the hell was I doing? Sure, seeing someone fall to their death would sour the mood after a good day of work, but getting involved with someone this clearly troublesome couldn't have been the right answer. I knew from the last adventure that everything I touched turned to disaster.

"Huh? How did..."

The shadowy figure grasped at her body in disbelief; I, too, shared her amazement. Her familiar voice, outfit, and shimmering lunar pendant spoke to an unbelievable truth: the Night Goddess priestess had fallen from the sky.

"Wh-What are you doing here?" I stammered.

"Uh, Erich?" Mika tugged at my sleeve, but I'd already stepped out of cover in pure bewilderment.

"You're...the piecemaker?" she asked. "How have you found yourself here?"

"That's my line," I retorted. "Why were you on the roof? You were moments away from falling to your *death*."

"Well... Um, more importantly, thank you for..." The priestess looked me over. "You *are* the one who helped me, are you not?"

From appearances alone, I didn't have any means of catching someone's fall. I looked like any other commoner in my linen shirt and pants, and nothing on my person suggested I could use magic.

Had Mika walked out with me, she surely would have looked to them instead. They had on their usual robes and had their wand on hand.

"Oh, man oh man, why is this happening?"

Speaking of which, my old chum was cradling their head and mumbling in the corner, and I was feeling much the same. In what universe was I supposed to expect to reunite with an acquaintance from my side venture in such exasperating circumstances? The chances had to be astronomically small.

But for now, we didn't have time to be worrying about things like that. Another set of footsteps could be heard growing nearer from above. Whoever was chasing her was closing in on us, and I had three options for how I could handle this.

First, I could pretend I hadn't seen anything, grab Mika by the hand, and run away as fast as possible. I would probably never see the priestess again, and Mika might lose some respect for me, but this would be the path of least resistance.

Second, I could turn the girl in for some kind of monetary reward. I would *definitely* never see her again, and Mika would be genuinely upset with me, but this was about as safe as the first option. The only

way this could go wrong would be if the pursuants weren't the type to let witnesses live.

Third... Oh, come on! This was the only real choice! The quixotic dream crap aside, what kind of man doesn't save a girl in need?!

"Wha—hey!"

I grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to a nearby door, summoning a Hand on the other side. Among all the add-ons I'd taken for the spell, Third Hand and the tactile feedback it offered was so universally broken that I thought it ought to be listed in an errata sheet for future editions of this setting: after all, it let me grope around and unlatch a deadbolt I couldn't even see.

"Get in, quick," I ordered. "Take care of her, Mika."

"Wh-What?"

"Jeez," Mika sighed. "Never a dull moment with you around, Erich. Come with me, miss—and not a peep from here on out, all right?"

The priest was stupefied by how the door had opened, by the strangely cooperative piecemaker whom she'd explained nothing to, by the mage going along with it all with a weary smile, and by the still-unexplained mystery of how she'd landed safely. Yet for all her confusion, she sneaked into the quiet room, and I took my post just outside to keep an eye on the people chasing her.

The approaching footsteps were far lighter than hers, and their minimal sound profile spoke to a great deal of experience. Not to say they were an expert *traceur*, but rather that they'd trained to run on uneven ground.

"There's a broken shingle this way!"

"I don't see her! She might've dropped into the alleyways! Comb the gutters!"

"Fan out, dammit! We need to surround her!"

There were multiple people after her: with a little focus I could make out five sets of footsteps. What on earth had she done to get five skilled trackers on her tail? Or perhaps she hadn't done anything; it was just as possible that she simply had something that they desired.

I could hear one of them break away from the crowd toward us, and she deftly made her way down into the alley. She used nearby eaves, decorations, and uneven segments of the wall to climb down without making any real noise.

The woman was tall and clad in simple yet well-made armor; her sheath had a dagger in it, despite being within city limits. Every aspect of her appearance spoke to her stature: she was a noble's personal steward, and a high-level one entrusted as both a secretary and bodyguard.

I caught a whiff of a classy perfume carefully tuned to not be

overstated as she approached me. I was pretending to loiter about by the door, and I looked up to see a chestnut-haired mensch. Her razor-sharp features were made even more menacing by her stern expression; a child more easily scared than me would have started bawling.

“You there,” she said. “Do you have a moment?”

“Um...yeah?”

I played the part of a passerby utterly dumbfounded by some woman who’d rained down from the sky perfectly. I couldn’t claim that it was the product of my role-playing experience, though, as I literally was exactly that. All I had to do was let my palatial speech slip, and I no longer had a need to act. I was confident that the GM would give me a bonus here even if I elected to roll for Persuasion and not Bluff.

“Did anyone come through here? I’d be *grateful* for any useful information.”

This was a typical way of striking deals with the lower class, and from how she flashed a silver coin, this was far from her first negotiation. People were the most sincere when incentivized by a reward that suited their wallets: too little and they’d lose interest, but too much and they’d overshare in a panic. A libra was perfect to get the info she needed in as little time as possible.

“I saw someone jump across the buildings just like you, miss. Boy, that spooked me. I was on my way home from selling stuff at the market when a shingle whizzed by me! I thought I was gonna die!”

I kept my lies and truths equally mixed. I still had a folding table, chair, and ehrengarde box on me, so I really looked the part of a random bystander. Of course, I happened to be a random bystander who had a soft spot for scenes where floating girls were caught after they rained down from, say, a castle in the sky, but she didn’t know that.

“Thank you, that helps. Treat yourself to a nice dinner tonight.”

The woman placed the coin on the box of figurines I was cradling, and climbed back up the way she came with the same finesse as her descent.

...*Holy moly*. I couldn’t pick up any trace of mana, so she’d scaled the wall with physical prowess alone. *I wonder if I can learn to do that. I’m sure it’d come in handy during an urban campaign.*

Ah, but I couldn’t let my TRPG-addled brain get the better of me. If I ever tried to scramble around up there without the backing of some powerful noble, I was sure to be arrested by the city guard.

I waited to confirm that the pursuers were all out of the vicinity and slipped into the building with the other two. The only source of light was a tiny window, but I could make out enough with my Cat

Eyes to tell we were in a storage room. Surrounded by heaps of filled sacks, the priest in hiding stood with a worried expression.

“What happened to my pursuants?” she asked.

“They left. I hinted that you jumped into a different alleyway, so we should be safe for the time being.”

Now it was time to hear her story. No normal priestess would have a noble’s subordinates chasing her down, but for all the trouble she represented, there was a rule older than tabletop games themselves: thou shalt help a maiden on the run.

[Tips] As the Empire’s showpiece to foreign ambassadors, buildings in the capital of vanity are tightly restricted so that all the roofs in any given district will be of equal height. This means that an average mensch confident in their leg muscles can use the rooftops as a convenient walkway. But beware: the crime of disrupting townscape upkeep is punished with a hefty fine of twenty-five librae or a month of unpaid labor.

“We’re in...” Mika summoned a dim orb of light. “...A warehouse?”

Indeed, our makeshift hideout was one of the many storehouses dotted throughout the city. Although the capital’s main purpose was to act as a hub of diplomacy, the large walls showed that it was prepared for a siege in dire times. The palace was a bastion for our executive government: it had a moat the size of a lake and four whole castles guarding it, not to mention the metropolis an invader would have to wade through to reach it.

Naturally, the crown needed to maintain supplies if they wanted to withstand a siege; there were imperial storage units all over the town. I suspected that either this alleyway entrance was only meant for when goods needed to be hauled out, or the dual deadbolts were spell-locked, only accessible by a mage.

I’d complained about my luck, but it seemed fortune hadn’t totally abandoned us. A deserted spot that no one would ordinarily be able to enter was perfect for laying low. Had we barged into someone’s home, the resident’s scream would have done us in.

“So, Erich,” Mika said with a furrowed brow and their hands on their hips. “Want to explain yourself?”

Noticing our tension, the priestess worriedly shifted her gaze between the two of us.

Yet I didn’t exactly have a good explanation. There was a girl, and a bunch of people were chasing said girl. The classics were classics for a reason, and the royal road dictates that she who is chased is innocent. Sure, sometimes the runaway damsel ends up being a thief

or someone whose purpose is to drag the party into all kinds of tribulations, but that was a fun twist too, so I was all for it.

Jokes aside, I *knew* her. How could I cast her away without finding out what had happened? I explained to Mika and they put a hand to their face.

“Ah, so *she’s* the ehrengarde player... Fair game. Leaving her out to dry here would be too cruel.”

“Right? Besides, tons of sagas start with the protagonists sheltering a girl on the run.”

“I always knew you had it in you to be a hero, but this is grander than I expected.”

Mika’s exasperated but affable laugh let me know they were on board; we could start moving the discussion forward.

“Um,” the priestess interjected. “I’m very thankful for your help, but...why?”

“Like I explained to my old chum here,” I said, “I think it’s only natural to lend a hand to someone I know so well.”

Surprise was written all over her face, visible even through her concealing hood. She’d been clutching her medallion tight to fight her growing unease; now she was white-knuckling it.

“You saved me for that alone? Me, a stranger whose name you do not know?”

She couldn’t bring herself to believe me without reservation. True, common sense dictated that my reason for saving her was absurd: who would risk their own life for someone being chased by five people on a rooftop, especially when the pursuers were clearly being led by someone of considerable standing?

I wouldn’t—that is, if she truly were a stranger.

“We’ve enjoyed many a deep conversation,” I said. “I believe your decisions over the board speak volumes to your character.”

As hackneyed as it was, I considered this the truth. The realm of play was far more expressive than most gave it credit for, and I couldn’t count the number of times I’d thought to myself that a move was very like the person making it. Drawing from my experience, I’d decided this priestess was worthy of my trust—at least, enough for me to save her once and ask why she was being chased.

She froze in astonishment for a moment, but soon covered her lips to giggle in a very genteel way. “Then I suppose you are quite the untrustworthy gentleman.”

“Ha ha! She’s got you there, Erich.”

“...That’s fair. Looks like I’ll have to tally another loss for me.”

Ouch, I didn’t think she’d go there. I employed a lot of diversions, decoys, and baits to take major pieces; I couldn’t refute her. She preferred honest offensives using her emperor; I was the antithesis of

her fair playstyle.

“But as devious as you are,” she added, “I know well that a friend is more valuable than small change.”

We laughed for a spell, and then I showed her the silver piece the woman had given me outside. The priestess bit her tongue as if there was something she wanted to say but couldn’t bring herself to.

Hm? If I remembered correctly, this coin had been minted to celebrate someone named Archbishop Lampel. Lampel the Hairless had been some big shot theologian who earned a place on our currency with a particularly noteworthy dissertation, and these usually went for twenty percent more than a libra on account of their good make.

Why had the priestess’s expression clouded up upon seeing the silver piece? While I would have loved to roll for perception, the answer didn’t seem too hard to find: whoever was after her was almost guaranteed to be someone she knew well, like a member of her immediate family. Coupling the noble bodyguard I’d spoken with earlier with her refined mannerisms let me see the big picture on my own. The priestess was probably heartbroken that they’d stoop to such low tactics in order to hunt her down.

Had she been the type of mademoiselle to throw a tantrum saying, “How dare she buy my whereabouts with this cheap coinage!” then I could have ignored her without a slight on my conscience, but alas.

“So,” I asked, “why are you being chased?”

“Huh? Oh, um...”

Not having expected me to get right into the real issue at hand, the girl reeled and her eyes darted between me and the floor.

Whoops, I shouldn’t have been that hasty. We’re barely acquainted, so nothing good will come from rushing her. “You don’t have to answer if you don’t wish to. I only asked in the hopes of helping a good friend and rival.”

Choosing whether to press or withdraw based on another person’s reaction to a question was difficult, and one wrong move could immediately end the conversation. She seemed hesitant to divulge—and not in the way where she might ostensibly be inviting me to pry—so I figured it was best not to overstep my bounds.

“Still,” I said, “may I ask for a name, at least? I am Erich of Konigstuhl, a piddling servant to a magus.”

“And I am Mika, but one humble student sullyng the seats of the College, studying with the Hannawald cadre within the School of First Light.”

As the two of us bowed together, the priestess pondered for a moment, still holding her holy icon close. At last, she made up her mind: her hand reached up and she removed her hood.

“I am Cecilia. I am a lowly priestess who offers prayer to the Night Goddess with the Circle Immaculate from a church on Fullbright Hill.”

Her unveiled visage was that of the moon on a foggy night, freshly revealed by a crisp breeze: her image was vivid as it was enchanting. Her skin was profoundly fair, but retained a vibrant vivacity all the same; the unblemished palette of white was accented by lips pinker than the most brilliant cherry blossom. My assumptions of her stature were reinforced by the dignified garnets gleaming deep brown in her long-slit eyes, accentuated by the lighter chestnut of her long, straight hair coming down sharply to decorate the bridge of her nose.

Childlike roundness lingered in her beautiful features, but the glimmering will that shone through her windows to the soul did away with such immaturity in favor of raw captivity. It was almost difficult to believe that a person could be born so empyreal in appearance.

At once, my doubts disappeared: she was noble. Her unfathomable elegance, poise, and command of upper-tier palatial speech betrayed the tale of a young lady running away from home. I could see why she might want to conceal her backstory. I had no doubt she'd found herself here after making a daring escape in order to elude some terrible injustice.

Once again, Mika and I didn't need any outward cue to exchange glances. And again, we nodded in unison with the same thought in mind: *let's help her*.

“In that case,” I said, “we won't delve any deeper into your personal affairs, Miss Cecilia.”

“Agreed,” they echoed. “We should try and leave the area quickly, so if you don't wish to answer, I will not ask. Any friend of my old pal is a friend of mine, after all.”

Mika's closing statement left me beaming. I raised a fist their way and they knocked their own against it without missing a beat.

“But wherever to?” Miss Cecilia asked. “There are already lookouts on the rooftops, and they'll occupy the streets soon enough...”

She was clearly unable to keep up with the rapid developments, and surely would have had steam wafting off her thick robes had this been a manga. Although she was quick to move in ehrengarde, the unpredictable events had overheated her brain.

And, I mean, I couldn't blame her. I was some kid she barely knew who ran a board game piece shop; not only had I pulled out some wily tricks to save her, but I was now offering to see this through for nothing in return.

Who wouldn't hesitate in a situation like this? If I'd been in her

shoes, I would've been convinced this "Erich" character was going to betray me at the most critical point of the story. It was unthinkable for a chance meeting to be this perfectly arranged...but that was true from my perspective too.

"The blossoming capital's artistry isn't exclusive to the surface." With a mischievous grin, I pointed toward a trapdoor hidden in the darkness of the room.

Let the urban adventure begin.

[Tips] Cityscapes are one of many different settings a TRPG can take place in. They are a far cry from dungeons, abandoned castles, and open plains, often requiring the party to interact with all sorts of characters to solve a mystery in the heart of a metropolis.

The pursuers had not been unleashed on a whim. The girl had escaped the estate with the help of sympathetic maids a little over two hours prior, so they had certainly been caught off guard; still, they made their moves with proper foresight.

Not only had the woman commanding the pursuit rounded up her most elite to give chase, but she'd sent messengers bearing the news of the girl's escape to every corner of the city. Knowing that the target of her mission was important like no other—the girl drew from one of the most sublime bloodlines in the country and had even been raised in hiding until now—she'd already planned ahead for the slim possibility that her team would lose sight of their mark.

The captain of the search party had never expected to resolve the issue on her lonesome; the world was too imperfect for that. Impeccable planning and the best security money could buy still allowed some to slip through the cracks, and she was willing to endanger her reputation if it meant patching up even one more point of failure.

Accolades were only worth so much. The city guard scoffed at her, jeering about how overblown this was for a single girl on the run; the imperial guardsmen dug at her, asking if this was really worth their time. Even so, she did not waver: all the distinction in the world meant no more than a roadside pebble when weighed against the lord she venerated.

However, in other respects, one could even say that she was overly optimistic. Sincere diligence was of paramount importance in imperial high society, but that was not necessarily a universally held opinion. Some preferred to use the mistakes of others to line their own pockets.

Among the many officers tasked with deploying men in search of

this missing person of interest, one had come up with a dastardly idea: if he were to find the child before anyone else and turn her in directly to her family without reporting to his superiors, the prize for his efforts was sure to be exorbitant.

These sorts of lowlives could be found wherever one went. So obsessed with their own well-being were they that a jingling sack of change was enough to buy any loyalty they had to goodness; this held true no matter how strict the moral code or how severe the penalty.

Just as the captain of the search went about life with an unwavering faith in the infallible nature of someone above, there existed scum who could imagine nothing more sacrosanct than their own greed. Such was the duality of the world.

As a matter of course, a conniving cur could only employ conniving tricks. He took one look at his available pieces, and after sending his subordinates off on the job, he turned to his source of alternative income.

The shadows of the sprawling city were home to unscrupulous folk willing to toe the line of legality, if not boldly step into the realm of the illicit. These criminals called the sewers of Berylin their home. While certain circumstances prevented them from setting up a permanent headquarters, they were much in their element when moving around beneath the earth—a fact that coincided to a predestined degree with the capital's subterranean infrastructure.

Their position primed them for unlawful activity, and the shameless officer thought they would make the perfect pawns. Crooks were ever at the ready so long as one had the cash to buy them, and soon they would gather their men, tap into their streams of intelligence, and get feet on the ground to find the girl.

Most of the gangsters fanned out through the city's underground passageways, expecting to surface at different points around town to continue their investigation there. The unseen network of tunnels was only ever home to them and the occasional state official there to maintain the system; no normal person would ever be found there, let alone the young lady they were hunting.

Indeed, one could consider it no less than a bizarre twist of fate that destiny had prepared for them a violent surprise.

[Tips] The imperial underground waterways—or the sewers for short—are a hybrid aqueduct and sewage-treatment system that span the underground levels of the capital. Countless pipes sprawl in every which direction, and many walkable passageways have been constructed alongside them for upkeep purposes.

Only maintenance personnel and College affiliates are

allowed to enter, but the expansive network of tunnels is impossible to police effectively, even for the crown jewel of the Rhinian state.

Middle Act

Middle Act

When a session drags on, the GM may need to bring the tale to a stopping point with a larger non-boss encounter. These are often treated like other hallway fights, but some GMs elect to award experience or loot to represent the party's growth over the long adventure.

"To think all this was just underfoot," Miss Cecilia said in awe.

The Trialist Empire's infrastructure was far beyond that of the Middle Ages I'd read about in history books; it bore a closer resemblance to the marvels of engineering seen in Classical Rome. Of all the great masterworks in Rhine, though, the gargantuan array of pipes that made up the Berylinian water system was the greatest.

"We'll struggle to reunite if we end up separated, so please make sure to stay close."

My chosen escape route had been a trapdoor leading from a storehouse to the sewers. We hadn't stumbled into a commercial storage unit, but rather one belonging to the crown—explaining why the alleyway entrance had been secured with only deadbolts—and these sorts of buildings always came with passages leading to the facilities below.

The crown couldn't exactly allow random houses to have access to the underground, nor could inspectors reasonably come and go through private property. These accessways supplemented the manholes dotting various streets throughout town, and spoke to the Empire's willingness to support systems even after they were already established. This level of commitment drove home just how intelligent the architects of this city were, and reinforced my amazement that Mika was aiming to join their ranks.

"All right, Mika," I said. "Where are we?"

"Uhh, give me a second. I didn't bring my map today, so... We shouldn't be too far from the main eastern passage, so if we can find a sign somewhere, I should be able to figure out where we are."

The three of us stuck close to one another as we carefully trod down the narrow path. Grooves meant to let rainwater pass lined the floor, and I could hear a trickling sound ring up from below. It hadn't looked like it was going to rain, so this was probably waste from some

home or another.

Mika led the formation, with Miss Cecilia in the middle, and me covering the rear. With two of us lighting the way with magic, we could make out enough to advance without fear of losing our footing.

After walking for a short while, we came upon a wide tunnel. The long, long cylinder had walkways on either side of the deep yet gentle stream in its center. With the brick walls and masoned flooring, it was more a testament to human ingenuity than a creepy hallway—at least, so long as it was well lit.

“Is this...a sewer?” Miss Cecilia asked. “I find it rather peculiar...”

“That it doesn’t smell?” I said.

“Yes, and that the water seems very clean. I haven’t spotted any insects either.”

The priestess leaned over the water without fear and went around carefully inspecting the brick and stone that made up the passage. To a trained eye, this was the solemn manifestation of many a talented architect, but most would shrink away or at least show some distaste for a location as unpalatable as the sewers.

Much to my surprise, she did not show any such aversion; in fact, she seemed delighted to find herself in a place she had never visited before.

“What pretty ornamentation on the walls. Oh, and what’s this? There’s something written here. My, this writing is rather archaic. It says... ‘The superintendent can eat a fat one,’ and, ‘Give us a raise?’”

Seeing her stick her nose into everything she found novel was...well, she reminded me of an elementary schooler on a field trip. She seemed like she was around my age—my physical age, that is—but acted more naively, perhaps on account of her sheltered upbringing.

“Oh, I know where we are. Remember, Erich? We came here around the middle of last month.”

Not to spoil her fun, but the patterns on the wall were for more than entertaining well-to-do ladies. These were unique codes that made different areas of the system distinguishable from one another to the few people who could decipher their meanings. I had a general understanding of them as well, since Mika had taught me the basics on a previous trip.

“This area connects to the tap water system of the city,” I explained to our guest. “The water here only flows to one more cleaning tank before going back up to the surface, so it’s already been treated several times by this point. That’s why it’s so clean.”

“Is that so? I’d once heard compulsory sewer labor to be a punishment for criminal offenses, so I had imagined these tunnels would be quite the fearsome place.”

Had these been the drains of industrial Britain, we would be in a fearsome location indeed. However, this world had the curious phenomenon of magic, and this city was the capital of vanity in such a world. No matter how beautifully manholes were adorned, a terrible odor would instantly undermine any attempt to put on airs. The Empire's insistence on polishing its infrastructure to perfection bordered on downright petty.

All this to say, the sewers weren't anything to worry about so long as one knew how to carry themselves—but that was a big if.

"Rats and the like do pop up from time to time," I continued, "meaning one might be at risk of catching something foul down here. But the capital's waterways are well maintained, so there's no need to worry."

"My, you're very knowledgeable on the matter. Oh, what is this pattern here?"

Whoa there, you really do have a childlike sense of wonder. That won't get you killed, per se, but... "Excuse me."

"Eek!"

Miss Cecilia had been one pace away from letting her curiosity direct her to a large opening with a carving of a relief valve and water droplet at the top before I yanked her back by the arm. Her subsequent shriek was not a product of my haphazard tugging, mind you: the instant she stepped forward, a translucent body had jumped out from the opening onto our walkway.

Yes, yes, run along now. I used a Hand to scoot the soft, jiggly mass back into its den. I'd grown used to this slimy sensation over the course of many a bulletin board quest.

"Wh-What was that?"

"A keeper of the sewers," I said. "They feed on our waste to produce clean water; you could even consider them the rulers of this domain."

It was a slime: the College had crafted an artificial life-form that metabolized waste and filtered out impurities to create clear water. Kept in sewers across the Empire, these innocuous fellows were diligent workers whose sole purposes were to clean filth and eat up plague-ridden pests. Their invention was one of the greatest feats known to alchemy.

I ask that the "well-versed" among you remain seated: these slimes did not have any of *those* functionalities. They couldn't selectively melt away clothes or armor, nor did they have any reproductive need to assault the living; they simply ate whatever scraps fell their way.

R-rated services notwithstanding, these slimes did a terrific job of bolstering the Empire's waterworks to astounding levels. Any other

system of this scale would have sludge, mud, and dust everywhere, but these little creatures ate it all and even preyed on disease carriers like rats and bugs. While we were still in the posttreatment side of the facility, the water wouldn't be this clean without them.

Abroad, foreigners joked about the well-known fact that imperial water could be ingested without even boiling it—only true in major cities, obviously—and the industrious workers who made that a reality were trudging about today as they always did.

“The College is in charge of overseeing these slimes,” I explained. “I come down here to give them special feed every so often, so I know a bit about the area.”

My familiarity with the sewers had begun with the remarkable unpopularity of the slime maintenance quest on the College's job bulletin. Slimes mainly subsisted on random filth that they fermented and broke down into calories, but their metabolic process required magic to function. Feeding them rocks full of mana did wonders to keep them trucking along, so requests to do so showed up on the quest board a few times a month.

Naturally, crawling around the sewers for half a day to earn a single libra wasn't exactly enticing, and even the poorest students preferred to avoid the creepy underground if possible. As a vulture who could only pick off forgotten requests, it was one of the few tasks I could take without reserve, and I had grown well acquainted with these tunnels as a result.

Mika's navigational knowledge came in part from accompanying me, but mainly from their classes: oikodomurge hopefuls had to come down here as part of their practical lectures.

Seen in a different light, this dearth of foot traffic made this the perfect hidden route to throw off trackers, especially since I doubted a noble would even think to check here. We mostly knew where we were going, so the only other issue was the uncomfortable humidity that would cling to our hair and clothes; otherwise, this was an ideal route to get anywhere in the city without being stopped.

We just needed to be a teensy bit careful with where we stepped. The original alchemical inventors had been geniuses to be sure, but even they hadn't found a way to teach these primal organisms how to differentiate between what was and was not meant to be eaten.

Thanks to the slimes' hard work, though, the ground was clean enough that we didn't have to worry about slipping. As long as we kept track of where we were, the trip home was bound to be easy...

Or at least, it *had been* bound to be easy.



"I, ugh, augh..." I wheezed and tried to catch my breath. "I told...you...not to run off without..."

"Um, I'm very sorry." Miss Cecilia said. "It's all just so intriguing."

This was the most tired I'd been in quite some time. I wrung out breaths like my throat was an empty tube of toothpaste as I held back my desire to shout. Every word oozing from my lips tasted like iron.

Unfazed by the slime incident, the priestess had continued her grade-schooler act on several more occasions, necessitating a rescue each time. I had no idea how long it had taken us to get this far. She wandered down every wayward path with a curious "What's this?" and all I wanted was for her to stop. Did she even understand that we were *on the run*?

Imagining this multiplied by thirty, the struggle of educators in my past life sprang to mind. I could never.

"Please," I heaved, "I'm serious... Please stop, ugh, running off on your own... It's...dangerous..."

"I'm sorry, Erich," she said. "But if it's so dangerous, I really must be the one to—"

"I'm begging you... Just stay behind us... Just follow...me..."

"Blegh," Mika coughed. "Wait. Erich, wait... Water... I need water..."

Apparently, my old chum was even more exhausted than me, so we decided to take a short break. Unfortunately, we had been on the way home from a normal day at the bazaar, so we didn't have our usual travel gear. Food and drink hadn't been more than an arm's length away at the open-air market, so we hadn't thought to pack any; after stashing our shopkeeping goods at the storehouse, we were practically empty-handed.

Forget a waterskin—we didn't even have a *cup*. This was the pinnacle of inconvenience, but we couldn't have expected to stumble into an incident this suddenly. I could have avoided this had I been the type of adventurer to always carry my gear on me, but I was just a normal local going about my life.

Left with no alternatives, I summoned an Unseen Hand to catch the water we pulled out of the air.

"Goodness, the water is floating! Is this also magic?"

To a non-mage, the liquid appeared to be suspended midair; Miss Cecilia was too engrossed with poking at it to drink any for herself. Her finger only came into contact with the hand-shaped force field holding it up, but she seemed amused enough by how the sway she introduced caused the water to ripple with every touch.

She was a priestess: a devotee to the gods who invoked miracles with Their power would not know anything of magic. Mysteriously,

her reaction was a far cry from the outright hostility most faithful showed. Magecraft was the art of twisting the heavens' finest creation, and it followed that most clergymen didn't take kindly to it.

"Magic is so very versatile," she mumbled. "I suppose I can see why he is so preoccupied with it..."

For a moment, I wondered, *Who's "he"?* but thought better of asking and shelved the thought. I'd already decided not to pry, and now wasn't the time to question her. Judging from how she hadn't said anything of substance on the long walk here, she wasn't ready to share, and any undue meddling would just sour her mood. Instead, I chose to focus on the positives: she trusted us enough to let a secret slip in our presence.

"We're close to the Mage's Corridor," Mika said. "What's the plan?"

"Let's lay low at my place for the time being, since we'll be able to duck under any search spells there. My housekeeper is as terrifying as she is kind, after all."

The dear Ashen Fraulein watching over my lodging was an utter powerhouse that had run out countless tenants who had, in all likelihood, been trained mages. If a spell came flying our way to locate Miss Cecilia, the silkie would refuse such an ill-mannered entity so much as a foot in the door.

Alfar earned their title of living phenomena by manipulating complicated magic with intuitive ease. Few could match them in mystic pursuits, making my house in the low quarter our most realistic safehouse.

"Then we'll need to stay on our toes," Mika said.

"Yeah... Maybe one of us should hold her hand."

The issue was that, in order to approach our safe haven, we needed to traverse the perilous subways of the Mage's Corridor. This area was legitimately dangerous, so I was ready to tie Miss Cecilia up if that was what it took to keep her still. No matter how many warnings they received, the boneheads of this ward never stopped flushing their failed experiments down the drain.

Our nation's leaders had sunk massive sums into the construction and upkeep of this facility, and it went without saying that they weren't going to just forget to place restrictions on what could be disposed of here. Laws proscribed the dumping of certain substances with the threat of severe penalties. But the slothful were ever abundant, and tracing the origins of a contaminant required massive effort; those that couldn't be bothered to care about their actions' consequences constantly poured their trash into the sewers.

The location was just too convenient: one could throw away anything without worrying about witnesses, anything left for long

enough would be eaten up by slimes, and there were even convenient idiots who'd cover their tracks for them.

You see, cleanup crews hired to dispose of trash were not above breaking the law. Among the contractors tasked with getting rid of dangerous items, every so often a stingy worker would shirk their responsibilities and just come to the sewers to abandon their charges. I'd once stumbled upon a small box stuffed with unglazed earthenware vials full of suspicious chemicals, no doubt left behind to save on disposal costs.

As a result, the subterranean maze around the Mage's Corridor posed a serious threat to our safety. There was more than just toxic sludge: every so often, an alchemical solution caused any slimes that ingested it to turn rabid and die, so the slightest lapse in alertness in this hellhole could trigger a saving throw.

Just as I was preparing to summon a Hand to keep a permanent hold on Miss Cecilia's sleeve, I sensed something was off. Realizing that it was a Listening check, I pressed a finger to my lips and turned all my attention to my ears. I extinguished my mystic lantern and Mika dutifully followed suit. Too accustomed to the light, my eyes could see nothing in a world lit only by the fickle shafts of sunset that bounced in from the gutters; I closed them to acclimate them more quickly and shut out distractions.

The constant noise of running water was joined by the faint echo of something else: careful footsteps. They were clearly aware that sound carried well in these tunnels, and each step sounded more like someone was wiping down a stone tile... *They have cloth wrapped around their shoes.*

While my abilities weren't enough to accurately discern their numbers, I could tell there were more than one. I knew that the saying warned not to speak of the devil, but wasn't this a bit soon?

Only lawless rascalions would ever bother to sneak around a place like this. Whether they were a disposal crew or black-market peddlers, no criminal fancied the idea of giving away their position for free; a good citizen on decent business wouldn't need to hide their presence like this.

The footsteps were getting closer. Unfortunately, all we could do was retreat to a secluded alleyway and wait for them to pass. I doubted they'd pounce on us just for running into them, but nothing good could come of an unnecessary encounter.

"Excuse me," Miss Cecilia said, "is something the matter? Why have you turned off the lights?"

The fuck?! Why would she start speaking now, of all—oh, of course! She'd been too busy looking around to notice me putting my finger to my lips!

The footsteps were picking up speed as they closed in on us.
What?! Why would you come toward us?!

Before I could find any time to think, I locked eyes with a man rounding the corner.

“Augh!” As he came around, an intense light blinded me. He had a lantern painted black on three sides to serve as a spotlight; I suspected it had been tweaked to bounce around the light and strengthen its beam, because it had managed to rob me of my vision from a considerable distance.

Dammit! My attempt at adjusting to the dark had just left me more vulnerable to the radiance!

“The hell?! Is that nun the brat we’re after?!”

“Why’s she here?!”

“Who gives a damn?! Nab her!”

The three resounding voices threatened to disorient me aurally as well. I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I heard two sets of footsteps bolt our way. My mind was a mess and I had no idea what was happening, but my body was moving on its own terms. I’d trained my martial responses to the point of second nature, and I leapt into action on sheer reflex.

This must have been the power of one of the traits I’d purchased with my ichor maze payday: Permanent Battlefield. I’d been able to switch gears on the fly before, but this trait brought my constant readiness to new heights. The motions I’d practiced tens of thousands of times now transcended the need for conscious thought, taking the form of an involuntary response to danger. It was an incredible boon: in tabletop terms, I could now roll reactions on unreactable events, and received a bonus when dealing with ambushes.

Blindness wasn’t insurmountable so long as I had a general idea of where they were. Unseen Hands were simple enough to make that I could launch six invisible fists in parallel to mow down the entire space in front of me.

“Grgh?!”

“Agh!”

“Hey! What’s wrong?!”

Four of my virtual fists slammed into something hard, but the other two landed against something duller. It seemed as though I’d only hit two of them; the last was probably waiting behind with the lantern in hand.

I suspected the rigid feedback had come from some kind of armor. I hadn’t gotten a good look before being blinded, but they must have been wearing breastplates or chain mail underneath their clothes.

On the other hand, the dull thumps were the unfamiliar sensation of fist on flesh—probably near a bone. I’d learned a bit of fisticuffs

under the umbrella of Hybrid Sword Arts, but truth be told, I hadn't ever put it into practice. Mostly because I hadn't needed to, but also because I didn't want to risk injuring my own body. I couldn't say this was all that pleasant of a sensation, even as a nicety.

The grunting was followed by the sound of one of the men collapsing. I hadn't been able to pinpoint where I'd hit them from the tactile feedback alone, but evidently one of my punches had landed in a critical spot. Just as I was feeling confident that things were looking up, a series of painfully shrill noises sliced into my eardrums: they were blowing a whistle.

Dammit, we've been had!

I hurriedly set up a Farsight to secure some sort of vision—while its main purpose was to peer into the distance, it could serve as a replacement for my real eyes in a time of need. Seeing myself from a head higher than my usual eye level was awfully disorienting, but I could manage so long as I thought of it as a third-person perspective game. I called up my Hands once more to finish what I'd started.

Now that I could see, I didn't need to rely on closed fists: I grabbed onto the collars of their filthy clothes—rags, really—and pulled them tight. With six appendages, I could dedicate two to each enemy; the one on the ground was down but not out, so I had to make sure he wouldn't get up. I choked each out with a judo-style lapel stranglehold. Unseen Hands could approach from any direction, making it trivial for me to get an angle on their collars that would make them dig into their carotids.

“Grbl... Ghgh...”

“Wha... Brlgh...”

A sufficiently powerful enemy could pry them off, since my force fields had a physical presence, but I could make that nigh impossible by using a technique that pitted their own garments against them. As their brains ran out of oxygenated blood, their struggling slowly came to a halt. I held the position for a little while for good measure, and regained my sight by the time they were all out cold.

“Are you all right, Mika?”

“Yeah, other than the stars I'm still seeing. What about Lady Cecilia?”

“M-My eyes have yet to return. Oh, my head...”

I was battle ready again, but that wasn't enough to let my guard down. That thug had shouted, “Nab her!” when he'd seen Miss Cecilia; they hadn't come our way to eliminate witnesses to a crime, but specifically to find her.

Whether this was just bad luck or we'd somehow been seen entering the sewers, this was bad news. The sound of a whistle would travel a considerable distance in these tunnels, and the pattern the

goon had used had sounded like some sort of code.

Look, see? I heard more footsteps. As it turned out, those crooks hadn't been the only ones scurrying around the sewers.

Oh, give me a break! This isn't in the realm of "bad luck" anymore! You drop a campaign in my lap out of nowhere and don't even give me my armor for a full-on encounter?! What's wrong with you, GM?!

Had I been fully armed and without a helpless princess to protect, I would have gladly leapt into battle to beat them all down...but I couldn't let anything happen to Miss Cecilia, and I didn't know anything about how strong or numerous our enemies were.

"Gods dammit," I groaned. "I can't believe they're already here. Mika, we need to run! Lead the way!"

"Huh?! Agh, wait, where are they coming from?! Uh, let's double back for now! If we take a wide loop around, we should be able to get home from another path!"

This was our best bet for avoiding a confrontation. Unfortunately, my Listening skill wasn't enough to echolocate with all this reverb, so the best we could do was run around and hope to throw them off our trail.

Not that I expected it to be easy. We were used to the sewers, but those chasing us were probably even more so. The difference in our familiarity was going to be night and day, especially since they were probably no strangers to the filthy paths we avoided to keep clean, as evidenced by their tattered clothing. Their clean clothes were kept safe in bags and only changed into when surfacing; being equipped to shift between underground dealings and daily life showed that these thugs were well trained.

"Tsk, they're close," I said. "Let's get going."

The footsteps were fast approaching; their shoes were padded, so they were likely to be even closer than I imagined. I'd wanted to check the unconscious ones for a weapon, but we couldn't spare the time.

"Th-This is enough!"

"Huh?"

However, the damsel fueling the chase planted her feet just as we were about to run. I whirled around to see her ready to explain herself, but...

"Pardon my rudeness!"

"I cannot allow you two to put yourselves in—eek!"

We didn't have time to listen to nor convince her. I understood that she felt guilty and wanted us to leave her behind, but it was too late for that now. Besides, if we were going to abandon her at the first sight of conflict, we would have been floating in a bath with an extra few coins in hand by now.

My obsession with adventure needed no repetition, but Mika's love of heroic sagas was remarkable too. Had they been the type to flee in the face of danger, they would have cut ties with me after our life-threatening journey to Wustrow. For all the minutiae that differentiated us, we were two peas in a pod.

I lifted Miss Cecilia up without waiting—I wanted to keep one hand open, so she would have to live with being hoisted onto my shoulder—and booked it. As soon as I began running away from the footsteps, she stopped talking; maybe she was afraid of biting her tongue.

Ah, how rude of me: I knew from our games that she was an intelligent person. She must have caught on that arguing wasn't going to change anything.

We ran down the most secluded paths we could find, but the uninterrupted patter of footsteps and the occasional whistle remained persistently within earshot. Even though we couldn't tell how many of them there were, it should have been impossible for them to have enough men to totally surround us. Why did it feel so impossible to escape?

I swept away our tracks every now and then with a Hand, but I couldn't find the time to put together a full Clean spell, let alone do anything about our scent. That said, it felt less like the enemy had a talented scout and more like they were reading our next move based on our starting location.

The underground was a sprawling network of pipes, but not all of them were perennially suitable for human travel. Runoff from a storm several days removed could flood certain paths, and others were totally blocked off in service of large-scale repairs.

"Whoa, crap! Turn around, Erich, turn around! There's a slime!"

"What?! *Another* one?!"

And, like the one my friend hurriedly abandoned, some paths were occupied by the keepers of the sewers. Still, there shouldn't have been *this* many of them: we'd run into three slimes already. Their presence blocked the flow of water, so multiple units weren't normally meant to be active in the same area at any given time. The piping was designed to be redundant, so that one or two points of blockage wouldn't escalate into a bigger issue, but this was clearly not right.

Do these thugs have some way of manipulating the slimes?

"I see light! They're over here!"

"They're close! Box 'em in!"

Footsteps did not precede these voices; instead, I heard the sound of paddling water. *Dammit, do these guys have kayaks or something?! No wonder we can't get a lead!*

I had no longsword, no zweihander, no catalysts, and no

projectiles. Mika's presence kept the situation from being totally hopeless, but this was all but the worst way to fight on the enemy's home turf.

Schutzwolfe. If only I had Schutzwolfe, I could cut down twenty—no, thirty goons without a problem!

A voice pricked at the corner of my mind: the formless emotion it represented was that of anticipation.

No, simmer down. I don't plan on using you. I wasn't about to let a bloodthirsty killer have its way. What was I going to do if the mafia tried to hunt me down as revenge for killing their grunts?

"Damn," I said with a click of my tongue. "Mika, we need to speed up. Are you good?"

"Just fine," they answered, "if you ignore how badly I want to hop in a bath right now."

Hah, I thought. Then let's get this over with and find a tub.

[Tips] Some sections of the imperial water-transfer network are sealed off for construction for years at a time.

Where there is man, there is sin.

The imperial capital was no exception to this truth, and found itself home to what one might call organized crime. They were, without exception, smaller than their counterparts found in other urban centers; still, these elite gangsters continued to eke out a dishonest living amidst the devoted knights, steadfast guards, and obedient populace that made up Berylin. Wading into a sea of model citizens, they blended into the waters of good intent as their minds spun devising ways to stay afloat.

Among the various groups that made up the capital's criminal world, one was known to its competitors as Hydra.

Their main business was smuggling: whether one needed help crossing city lines or simply wanted to get their hands on contraband, their services were always in high demand, and at high prices. However, that didn't mean they shied away from using the secluded nature of their underground home to dip their toes into the felonious realm of kidnapping and torture. These experts of the labyrinthine sewers were head and shoulders above other two-bit smugglers, said to be capable of sneaking a *lesser drake* into the capital undetected.

They had no true name with which to announce themselves. A label was the first step to discovery, which could herald a catastrophic chain reaction; they relinquished the most basic representation of unity on principle.

The organization was comprised of small cells, led by captains who were in turn led by commanders who steered their nameless gang

via council. Their years of experience had morphed into mastery of the imperial waterways, affording them unparalleled mobility in their field.

And so, when a wretched fellow came by with a request fueled by his pathetic greed, they fanned out below the streets as one of many search parties. What reason did they have to refuse? Snatching up a witless noble girl was easy—especially one in eye-catching holy garb.

Their chance discovery in the sewers was a blessing like no other. Over the course of their long history, they had developed an intuition for municipal maintenance schedules—alas, not even they had been able to grease palms within the government—and learned the behavior of slimes. Catching her here was sure to be much, much easier than the aboveground chase they'd braced themselves for.

The only hiccup was the two extras by her side, and their inexplicable understanding of the subway system. Three men were concussed in the blink of an eye, and they continued to run around while avoiding all the dead ends; clearly, these weren't just everyday brats.

Regardless, the gangsters did not panic. On top of their positional advantage, they also had a secret weapon that would guarantee their success.

The arcane life-forms the College had created to roam the waterways had many behavioral quirks—one of which was their tendency to immediately attempt to purify any substantial filth that piled up in the clean water pipes. Unbeknownst to the average person, there was a special slime that spread itself thin across the entire network to carefully monitor the water quality.

The criminals had discovered this through sheer coincidence. Generations prior, one of the group's members had done his business in the tunnels and noticed that a slime had been dispatched to a location that hadn't aligned with any known patrol paths. He'd repeated his experiments on a whim, and his confirmed findings eventually evolved into the strategy they used now.

Slimes filled up the areas they inhabited, so by throwing feces or rotting animal carcasses into clean water, they could block off entire passageways. This was primarily meant to split up the authorities if their allies were being chased, but nothing stopped them from using it to cut off escape routes when they were on the hunt.

While they couldn't afford to go on the offensive against the city guard—long ago, they'd pushed their luck so hard that the guard had been one step away from establishing a permanent post in the sewers—the tactic was dominant against anyone they were truly willing to fight.

These men were anything but negligent; they had begun plugging

up pathways as soon as they'd realized their mark was underground. Their motivation wasn't in buttering up a meaningless small fry, nor was it for his paltry reward.

The Empire's pockets were unfathomably deep. With the right intermediary, the crown would pay out no matter who found the girl. A seasoned criminal syndicate could think of anything a shortsighted crooked cop could, and more—including a way to cut him out of the picture for a bigger payday.

Earning the animosity of a nobody meant nothing to them. They kept contact to a bare minimum: a single messenger disguised and under alias had been the only liaison for all their communication, whether that was a briefing or a payout. As soon as they cut the bridge, the corrupt officer would be lost chasing an organization whose name he didn't know.

Thus, the world dubbed them Hydra, after the infamous dragon who could only be felled by severing all its heads at once.

Their speedy encirclement was nearing its end. Open hallways had been converted to dead ends without their prey's knowledge, and their remaining path left led straight to their burial chamber: a tiny room meant to store rainwater. The only pipe out that a person could fit through was too high up for a person to reach.

Everything was going according to plan...except for one critical misconception. The beast they hunted was no mere rat; they had cornered a terrible monster with enormous fangs.

[Tips] Hydra is a criminal organization that derives its title from a dragon species of the same name. Though the government has made several forays into the world under the table to stamp them out, they remain active to this day.

Life is full of dead ends: at some point in every person's journey, they will come across a predicament that can't be resolved no matter what price they're willing to pay.

The first time I experienced this myself had been when our family was forced to send Elisa to the capital. Who could have predicted that I would drag myself all this way to join her, only to land hip-deep in the same despair?

“...Damn.”

“They sure got us...”

My curse was met with my friend's resignation. We'd run and run and run until the final beams of sunlight vanished from the gutters above, and our dramatic escape had reached its pitiful conclusion.

After wading through a terrible path full of knee-high water, we were at a dead end. We'd desperately pressed through countless unnatural blockades, just to end up stuck in a dank tomb: we'd run

into a storage unit that distributed clean water to the surface.

They really did get us.

“This is the worst,” I groaned. “Oh, this is just the *worst*.”

“You said it,” Mika agreed. “I thought we knew this place like the back of my hand, but I guess they one-upped us.”

The loud sloshing of legs trudging through water rang out from the tunnel beyond. They were no longer showing any restraint, and instead used the noise of their impending arrival to kill our morale. At this point, it was a waste of time to try counting their numbers; they easily cleared single digits. With reinforcements sure to come, our position looked pretty grim.

“May I be let down?”

I’d hauled Miss Cecilia around for at least an hour, and she’d held her tongue until now for our sakes. She wriggled in my arm like she really meant it, so I obliged by slowly setting her onto the ground. Without an ounce of hesitation, she sullied her pristine robes and, for some reason, pulled us both into a hug.

“Erich, Mika,” she said, “thank you both so very much. I’m grateful beyond words that you would go so far—that you would do all this just for me...but this is enough. At this rate, I’m sure that you two will find yourselves in terrible danger. You may even lose your lives.”

Moderately shorter than us, Miss Cecilia’s face was buried in between our shoulders. I didn’t need to see her expression to know how she was feeling though: the damp heat soaking into my arm was enough.

“But please, no more. Thank you—thank you so much. The kindness you’ve shown me today is all I could ever ask.”

Her voice was trembling and she squeezed us so tightly that I was shocked her frail frame could produce such force. I didn’t know why she was so overcome with emotion, but one thing was clear: she had given up.

“Miss Cecilia,” I said, “I think you’re misunderstanding something.”

“That’s right,” Mika echoed. “And what a terrible misunderstanding it is.”

One didn’t need to be well versed in stories to know what she was going to say. She was about to pull an “I’ll surrender myself so you two can escape unharmed.”

However, that was a naive way of thinking. We were up against a criminal syndicate—and one in the capital, no less. Berylin was a living hell for lawbreakers, and their success here put them in a different league from the part-time ne’er-do-wells in rural cantons. I suspected plugging any information leaks would be their top priority,

meaning our lives were already forfeit; why would they bother letting someone run off with even a tiny sliver of knowledge about their business?

We had tried to run because we didn't want to deal with that. If we could just get away, we could ask Lady Agrippina—sure, she wasn't around, but the thugs wouldn't be able to reach us at the College—or Mika's master to help us mop up these lowly gangsters. That would have been the simplest solution with the lowest chance of blowing up in our faces later; so, we'd run.

Alas, the worst had come to pass: we could no longer run. But while we'd complained about how *awful* the situation was, no one had said anything about it being *hopeless*.

"We merely didn't want to work up any more sweat," Mika said.

"But they're the ones who picked this fight," I jumped in. "Why don't we give them what they came for?"

We still had one way out. I hadn't wanted to resort to this, but it was all we had left. Our final means of resolution was that which sat in every adventurer's back pocket: with a lucky physical "persuasion" check, we could have everything go our way.

"All right, then. Mika, will you join me in this battle?"

"You don't even need to ask. Compared to the zombies we saw in the ichor maze...they're nothing."

"Hah! Likewise, comrade."

In some ways, this was the perfect location. There was only one entryway, and the room was cramped and relatively short; they wouldn't be able to fit enough archers to barrage us with projectiles, and we were too close for high-angle fire. My greatest fear had been a stray arrow hitting Miss Cecilia, but now that seemed unlikely. The narrow opening also meant that we wouldn't need to worry about fighting two-versus-many so long as we controlled the entrance. While the water inhibited movement, that was practically a nonissue for me and my old chum.

"This place is just right."

I pulled out the fey karambit I always kept on me as my gentleman's carry and double-checked my grip. Mika had their wand in hand and pressed it to the wall with an indecipherable murmur.

"Please," they said, "right this way."

A section of the wall jutted itself out and curved in to make a semispherical hideaway.

"Wow, Mika! I thought you said the bricks down here were hard to manipulate."

"They're imbued with conservatory magic that makes them hard to alter, but I'm not the same old me. Besides, I'll need to learn how to work with other people's spells without breaking the enchantment if I

ever want to do any conservation work.”

“A-Are you two planning to fight?! Stop! Please, I beg of you, don’t risk your lives for me!”

Mika and I gave her a light push on each shoulder and led her into the makeshift cubby. It remained partially open so she wouldn’t suffocate, but it was only just big enough for her to crawl into. With this, we wouldn’t have to worry about her taking collateral damage.

“All right then,” I said. “Let’s do this. Ready?”

“As ever. Let’s give them a show.”

We were fully prepared and our spirits were high. The men grouping up by the entrance were loitering around, no doubt planning to slowly wear us down with demands to yield. But I couldn’t keep them waiting, could I?

“I’m off.”

“Yep. Leave your back to me.”

Mika was the most reassuring support I could ask for as I took my first step. I kicked off the submerged flooring and leapt out of the heavy water, hanging high in the air. My soaking-wet boot landed not on the water’s surface, but on the Unseen Hand laying directly atop it. By summoning pairs of invisible platforms over and over again, I had a dry walkway all to myself.

Freed from my hydraulic yoke, I sprinted forward with full agility, jumping into enemy lines in a single breath. There were more of them than I’d expected, but their gear wasn’t anything notable. Maybe they hadn’t accounted for the possibility that we’d bring the fight to them, but that carelessness made them sitting ducks.

I swiped up my fey knife in a backhand grip and sliced through the closest man’s face. My blade’s intricate arc entered through his chin, cut through his nose, and then crossed up to exit through his forehead. For an instant, the world stood still as the white line of my attack ran its course; not a moment later, a fountain of blood gushed forth.

“Graaah?!”

One down. He could still move, but the sharp pain and torrent of blood blocking his vision would keep him from contributing to the fight. I’d gone deep enough to score bone; he’d need something stronger than superglue to put his face back together.

“Hey there,” I said. “Good evening.”

Greetings are important. Surprise attacks were fair play, but it would be rude of me not to offer a salutation once it was over. Upon landing, I stayed crouched to kick another of the criminals and sent him flying; in the same motion, I pushed myself to my feet and used the upward momentum to elbow another.

The elbow was a staple weapon on the battlefield during hectic

scuffles; I was far more familiar with using it than my fists. However, modern martial arts associations on Earth had banned its use for its deadly nature, which was the same reason I didn't exactly find many opportunities to strike with it. The man I'd just hit stumbled backward from the force of impact and the back of his head slammed against the wall; he probably wasn't going to be able to eat anything anytime soon.

"You little shit!"

"C'mere, brat, I'll kill ya!"

"Oh, you've done it now!"

It took them a few seconds—time worth its weight in gold in my hands—and three fallen comrades to process what had happened, but they now raised their weapons and swung.

Their reactions were so slow that a Konigstuhl watchman performing at their level could expect Sir Lambert to blow a gasket and put them on a sleepless training schedule for their disgraceful conduct. Equipped with sacks of rocks and heavy sticks just unhazardous enough to not attract the attention of the guard, they attacked without paying any heed to the limited space we had. I hopped back, and they ended up hitting their own allies after failing to rein in their inertia.

Hmm, the first three weren't that impressive either. Maybe violence isn't their felony of choice.

At best, they were slightly better than an average person for not balking at the thought of hurting another living being. Their middling skill and my ability to move fast despite the flooded room had led to a good deal of friendly fire.

That's good! Keep it coming! I was more than happy to chip away at their forces without doing any work.

They tried to regroup for another offensive, but their next attack was taking a while. *Ah, of course*, I realized. The guys I'd knocked down were blocking the only path toward me, and they were having trouble getting them out of the way. Two adults were enough to pack the corridor tight, and the pipe that lay beyond was barely any wider. This was a textbook example of over-assigning troops.

I'd steeled myself to face the gates of hell, but our situation turned out to be less dire than I'd thought. This gang was so clinical with their wily tricks that they never encountered combat. What a sad bunch; violence was king in this line of work, after all.

"Erich, keep your head down!"

I processed Mika's command with an internal *Sure?* and stayed low after landing from my backstep. A split second later, the second wave's vanguard—they'd finally sorted out their traffic jam—went flying backward.

“...That might have been too strong. Do you think he’s alive?”

The perpetrator in this case was obvious: Mika had woven a spell near the exit to catapult a clump of brick with tremendous force. Shooting a stone was a classic offensive spell, every bit as recognizable as fire or lightning, but fit their oikodomurgy to a tee.

Their cantrip had shot a fist-sized rock at speeds so blistering that it still appeared blurry with my Lightning Reflexes at full drive. Judging from its stability in the air, they’d tweaked the projectile to be conical or otherwise aerodynamic. Mika’s newfound ability to directly contribute as opposed to playing a pure support role had probably been why they’d been so confident; I would go so far as to say they’d been *waiting* for a chance to show the spell off.

“Glragh! Blerrr, gfhgh...”

“Holy fuck, that’s bad! Get a grip, man! Come on!”

I could hear the victim’s disgusting glossolalia from the other side of the doorway amidst the panicked screams of whoever had fished him up. The water came up just below my knees, so he was at risk of dying if left alone; thankfully, our enemies were ready to clean up after us.

“Mika,” I called. “Good news! He’s not dead!”

“That’s nice to hear,” they responded. “I tried it out on test targets, but I was still a bit worried. I made sure to set it to shatter on impact so it wouldn’t be *completely* overpowering, but this is the first time I’ve used it on a real person.”

“Don’t fuck with us, you brats! You better get your asses over here, or I’ll kill your parents, your brothers, your sisters, and your whole family tree!”

“‘Good news,’ my ass! We’re gonna rip out your guts and feed ’em to the slimes when we’re through with you!”

Whoa there, I didn’t realize you still had the will to bark.

Unfortunately for them, our hometowns were too far to reach, and making good on their word to our ties in the capital would prove physically impossible. If these crooks were willing to take a stab at Lady Agrippina, I’d like to see them try.

But even so...they’d chosen the worst possible threat to make.

“Ursula.”

“Right here.”

I whispered under my breath so Mika wouldn’t hear, and the svartalf appeared with a singsong greeting. Her true power shone when the Sun God finished his daily reign, and the darkness of night was not limited to the surface. The lightless underground unseen to the moon was but another part of her domain.

“Would you kindly teach them what a precious thing light is? No need to hold back.”

“Oh my,” she hummed, “how frightful you are, Beloved One. But how could I possibly refuse a request from you?”

Ursula left her perch behind my ear and fluttered out of sight. She made off with the last vestiges of perceivable radiance with all haste, as evidenced by the chorus of panicked wails echoing down the pipe; the men’s vision had been pilfered by the dreadful fairy of the night.

They’d threatened my family: my brothers and parents back home, and Elisa here. I was rapidly losing any reservations about going all out. *Don’t get too attached to those faces of yours, punks.*

“Mika!” I shouted. “I’m pushing up! Cover me!”

“What?! Wait! Why are you leaving our safe zone?!”

I no longer had any reason to tread lightly. As numerous as they were, a blind opponent was hardly a threat, and I doubted any of them were strong enough to refuse alfish bewitchment. If I laid back and waited around now, it would take us years to get our well-deserved bath.

Throwing yourself into the fray without any chance of victory is reckless; lunging in to exploit a momentary weakness is bravery. I ran out of our room into the tunnel and swiftly checked both sides. There were more thugs grouped up on the left, so I instantly turned my invisible footholds their way, twirling in a mad dance to cut them down.

I sliced through eyes to guarantee blindness, chopped off fingers to disarm them, and grabbed a loose bludgeon out of midair to knock one out cold. A few of them had resisted Ursula’s invitation into the dark to some degree, but none could claim full command of their sight; combined with their companions plugging up space, their haphazard swings amounted to nothing worth mentioning.

“Jeez!” Mika shouted. “Don’t push yourself!”

I heard a series of low thuds on the right side. Using the angular momentum of an uppercut, I took a peek behind me and saw countless protrusions in the wall reach out to punch our foes with astounding power. The sideways pillars were too skinny to knock a grown adult out with a single strike, and stronger races or highly armored opponents could probably eat a handful without falling. However, the lightly armored rogues were mostly mensch, and even those that weren’t were still writhing in pain despite their continued consciousness. Teeth flew everywhere, landing in water bloodied by crushed noses—Mika’s side looked like it had caused more pain than mine.

“Whoa!” My persistent alertness allowed me to just barely react to the dull, heavy bloodlust I sensed beneath the water. A short spear shot sideways toward my midsection; I twisted clear and sandwiched the shaft between my arm and chest. Employing all my extra Hands, I

yanked up the weapon to come face-to-face with a strange hybrid between mensch and fish.

He was a merfolk. These amphibious demihumans had both lungs and gills, switching between the two breathing apparatuses with a specialized muscle. This fellow in particular closely resembled a catfish, and his ancestral ability to survive in muddy bogs meant he was perfectly capable of swimming in the sewers. As amazing as his talents were, I couldn't bring myself to marvel when he was putting them to use in crime.

Both of us held on to the spear and vied for position as we waged a battle to win superiority in balance. Although our bout only lasted an instant, it was plenty to discern his wealth of experience as a fighter.

Unwilling to unhand his weapon for free, he held on viciously. Fixating on a tool to the point of missing an opportunity was perhaps the most cardinal of battlefield sins, but in this specific scenario, the game of tug-of-war was a reasonable gamble to net him my head.

The merman was too strong for me to overpower with my childish build, and he knew his way around a spear well enough to grasp the nuance of how to combat me after I caught his weapon: he wanted to turn the situation around by toppling my center of gravity and drowning me.

I took him to be a savvy warrior—at worst, he was still the strongest of all the men I'd fought today. I couldn't understand why a man of his talents had cast his lot with a gang. With skills this refined, he could easily have made a living under the sun.

My mensch sensibilities made reading his fishlike expressions impossible, but a chill ran up my spine as he opened his mouth ajar. I immediately tilted my head to one side and an invisible *something* whizzed by the spot my eyes had just been in.

The merman had spat a needle at me. One wouldn't spot them on an open battlefield, but needles were a sidearm—generally categorized as such because they were ill fit for warfare outside of ambushes—that were as effective as they were heinous. They were especially potent in swordlocked states or tugs-of-war as a means of creating an exploitable opening—perhaps even more so than standard magic.

My thanks went out to Sir Lambert for having taught me about these underhanded tactics. Without the proper knowledge, my ill omen would have stayed a funny feeling, and I wouldn't have been able to take the proper course of action to counter it. Had it not been for those lessons, I would probably be squirming around for air with a hand on a bloodied eye by now.

Not wanting to stay in this position all day, I decided to join my

opponent in thinking outside of the box. At this point I'm sure it sounds done to death, but I used my full fleet of Hands to pull him at maximum power.

Each of my six Unseen Hands was stronger than I was. No matter how well-built or beefy the enemy, they wouldn't be able to fight this. I used my brute force to lift him up and flung him at the wall.

For his part, he realized my intention and tried to let go, but it was too late. I'd grabbed onto more than just his spear: I had a grip on both of his hands and an armpit. I knew a seasoned fighter would notice the extra Hands despite their invisibility; I'd accounted for that from the start.

The merman's body struck the wall with an awful squelching sound before slowly sliding into the water. At times, the environment made for the perfect blunt weapon: his face was crushed, and crimson oozed from his nose—I'd forgotten that fish also had red blood—at an alarming rate. He wasn't getting up anytime soon, but thanks to his gills, I could leave him be without worrying about him drowning on me.

Not only had I cleaned up the enemies' champion, but I'd picked up his weapon to boot. I'd been eyeing his spear, since it was well suited to the narrow passageway we found ourselves in.

I jabbed enemy after enemy with the stone tip of my spear from outside their meager weapons' ranges. This one-sided beatdown meant my victory rate was finally ramping up, and I was closing in on twenty crooks subdued...when *it* came.

Dozens of people were sloshing around in the water in a frenzy, but a deep rumbling echoed into the pipe from a distance.

“AAAHHH!!!”

That was when I heard the screams on the other end of the tunnel.

“Oh, gods, it's a slime!”

“Fuck! There's too much blood!”

“Make a break for it! We still have a chance! *Run!*”

All the gangsters abandoned the battle. They picked up any wounded near them and all ran off.

Uh, wait. What did they just say?

The noise of viscous fluid rubbing against the walls of the chamber gradually grew louder. It was only as I watched the gangsters toss away their pride in a mad dash to escape did it click: *it* was coming. The harbinger of purgation that saw no good or evil on its path to purification was *on its way*.

“Oh, oh—oh no! Mika, we need to run!”

“R-Run?! But where?!”

“Wherever it is, we need to grab Miss Cecilia!”

That thing was bad news—we couldn't do anything to fight it. It

was an enormous mass of pure superheated monstrosity that we couldn't do anything to. Even if I were fully armored and had all my catalysts, I doubted I'd get through more than a hundredth of its mass before it melted me in its bubbling bulk.

The slimes were akin to a stage gimmick that wasn't designed to be fought. Any attempt to interact with it would force the GM to try and intervene, and a party foolhardy enough to do it anyway would be met with a sigh and a folded up master screen.

Our only recourse was to flee like headless chickens. We sprinted on my Hands in utter hysterics, and by the time we got back to the rainwater storage room, we could no longer hear the splashing footsteps of the fleeing crooks. Miss Cecilia was poking her head out of the cubby, probably because the silence had her worried; while we normally would have been obliged to scold her, the matter at hand made her proactive approach worthy of the highest praise.

"Come out, please! We need to run!"

"U-Um! What happened?! What in the world is happening?!"

"We, uh, don't have time to explain! Please, just hurry—" As I pulled her out by the hand, we heard a tremendous mass slam into the wall behind us.

Oh gods. It's already here.

"Oh, oh, n-not good!" Mika yelled. "E-Erich, what do we do?! Should I try making a full pocket in the wall to shield us?! These bricks are impervious to them!"

"I don't think we'll have enough air to survive until it passes! Can you block off the entrance instead?!"

"No way! I can't fill a gap like that all at once, and the slime will probably tear straight through a thin wall!"

Crap, we're running out of time! I could practically see the sadistic smirk of the GM as he turned over an hourglass. *Wait, no, what do we do?! Are we done for?! Come on, there has to be something—maybe I can lift us up with Unseen Hands and keep us airborne until it... No, even the wall pocket is better than that!*

Ursula couldn't save us now, and Lottie's wind shield meant nothing if I couldn't summon her. While I could have called for her earlier and brought her down with us, speaking her name did nothing when we were cut off from the outside air.

Uh... Um...

"Excuse me!"

Mika and I were panicking over the few cards we had left in play when a piercing cry stopped us in our tracks. I whirled around, surprised by Miss Cecilia raising her voice for the first time, and saw her pointing to the ceiling. She was gesturing into pitch darkness.

"There! I spy an opening on the upper wall!"

“Huh? I don’t see—”

“No, she’s right! Look, Erich!” Mika flashed a mystic ray of light toward the heavens to reveal a hole: it was a pipe meant to redirect rainwater from above!

“Woo!” I yelped. “That’s incredible! Miss Cecilia, you’re a saint—a bona fide messenger of the Goddess!”

“O-Okay,” Mika said, “I should be able to make stairs leading up to it! We’re going to make it!”

My old chum poured all of their mana into their wand and smacked the floor, summoning a single pillar that towered upward, with steps jutting out from the core at regular intervals. Its threadbare nature made it feel a bit sketchy to traverse, but it was a proper spiral staircase that reached the ceiling.

“Yeaah! You did it, Mika! I love you!”

“L-Love?! Uh, um, er, I’m glad to hear that, but let’s hurry, Erich!”

Y-Yeah, probably not the time. We had Miss Cecilia go up first—having the slowest lead the way would cause the least confusion—with Mika following and me taking the rear. Climbing these steps without a handrail in the dark was stressful beyond belief, but I could always catch someone with a Hand if the worst came to pass.

“Wh-Whoa!” Mika exclaimed. “The water’s rising!”

“Huh?! Oh, um, shall I run?!”

“Slowly! *Please* walk up slowly!”

Slimes were far more dense than water, and the keeper of the sewers naturally pushed water along with it as it moved. The excess was rapidly filling up this storage tank, but I made sure to calm Miss Cecilia down and have her ascend at a sensible pace.

We were fine: the water was rising, but now that I was looking closely, I saw other barred outlets meant to let it escape to lower areas of the underground dotting the walls. These had probably been fitted specifically to counteract flooding in the case of a slime pushing along too much water.

“Oh... There are metal rods here.”

Miss Cecilia managed to complete her precarious climb, and now realized that our escape pipe was blocked by a set of bars. The water was closing in and had grown darker to herald the slime’s arrival, but we had nothing to fear. Mika could remove the barrier and get us to safety in the blink of—

“I-I shall remove them! Hrng...ah!”

The terrifying sound of metal being warped out of shape was followed by a short silence and then the resounding splash of something heavy sinking into the water.

Huh? Hold on... What?

“Did... Did you just pry the bars off?!”

“Hurry!” she replied. “Do you think the water will reach us here?!”

“Uh... Well... I don’t think it’ll rise past a certain point to prevent backflooding in the streets...”

Mika and I looked at one another in bewilderment. I silently questioned whether the barrier was something a skinny girl could brute-force, and they violently shook their head.

I’d figured as much. These things were built to withstand the literal tons of water that flowed in after a big storm, and I doubted they were flimsy enough for a normal human being to lift, let alone bend. I don’t think I could so much as make them creak with all six of my Unseen Hands.

“Wah?!” Just as Mika tried to join Miss Cecilia in the pipe, they totally lost their footing. They’d left one leg on the last step of the stairs, and it had crumbled underfoot.

As they had said earlier, these bricks mystically defied change; perhaps a tiny slipup in casting had been all it took to lose stability after supporting the weight of two people. More likely, however, was that its use as a foothold in the monstrous task of bending steel had been too much strain for the thin slab of rock to bear. For all my grumbling about my share of bad luck, Mika was right there with me.

“Gotcha!”

At any rate, I wasn’t going to just let my pal fall; I had to help Miss Cecilia too, since she’d tipped herself over in a knee-jerk attempt to save Mika. I allotted three Hands each to prevent their falls. Mika got one as a foothold and two to prop them up; Miss Cecilia was about to fall face-first because she’d jumped forward despite knowing she wouldn’t make it, so I gently pushed her back by the shoulders and stomach.

Phew, that should be enough...

Our moment of peril had subsided, and frankly, I was being negligent: it took me an extra beat to notice the wet footsteps blending into the echoing sounds of water.

I whirled around as Permanent Battlefield combined with my usual alertness sounded the alarm, but all that did was turn my fatal lag into critical lag. My whole field of view was taken up by the face of a catfish: the merman’s lidless eyes were opened wide in unconcealed spite as he pounced from the water and tackled me.

Why are you here, you bastard?!

“Argh!”

“Erich!”

My reaction was late, my footing unstable, and I’d been in the middle of shifting my balance from the staircase to the pipe. All together, these factors left me with no means of resistance as the

merman dragged me into the water with him. The only saving grace was that I managed to take a massive breath, knowing that I was going under.

“Mmrgh...”

Once again, these dice of mine had failed me with their accursed numbers at the end of the line. I still didn’t understand why he was here. Had his friends forgotten to save him because he was underwater? Left behind in a hopeless situation, had he let the flowing tides wash him here? What kind of bullshit was this?! I couldn’t even tell if this was my misfortune or the GM’s corrupt personality at this point!

I clawed at him to peel off his stranglehold, but his moisturizing outer coating of mucus kept me from getting a grip. His wrists were structured differently from a mensch’s, so I couldn’t even tell where to grab him to inflict the most pain. Worse still, his neck was too girthy to choke him out in return.

Urgh, I can’t focus for long enough to churn out a spell! The lack of air was dulling my brain to the point where I couldn’t summon the Unseen Hands I’d casually thrown around like real appendages... No, I’ll make one through sheer grit, dammit!

If I didn’t get this guy off of me, the slime would catch us and melt us to the bone. I’d probably drown before then, but I refused to die like this. *Wait a second. This asshole is trying to cut corners by pushing me down into the slime!*

As if I’d let you! I racked my brain for the most painful place I could target... *Here!*

A transient moment of concentration let me scramble together a single Unseen Hand that cut through the water and plunged into the merman’s body. I jammed my arcane fingers into his gills before clamping down and twisting with all my might.

His grip loosened up. Knowing that this was my last chance, I frantically squirmed free as he put a hand up to his neck in pain. I fled from the slime now nipping at my toes and breached the surface.

The air was delicious—as sublime as the first gulp of water I’d taken after conquering the undead swordsman’s ichor maze.

“Erich, hurry!”

“Please make haste! It’s almost here!”

I didn’t even get a moment to savor the taste of air; I paddled toward them like mad. Grabbing on to the staircase, I dredged my heavy, breathless body out of the water. My soaked hair clinging to my face was an infuriating distraction.

I thanked the heavens that the water could only rise so high. Climbing stairs was exhausting, but it was better than having to climb up the pipes in a panic.

Just as I rose onto the final step, I heard another splash; this time, I was ready to react. The merman shot out of the water like a flying fish, aiming to land a hit right in my side. His eyes were bloodshot and the injury in his gill left him drooling red.

Why?! Why do you insist on trying to kill me?! You could've just waited for us to get to safety and sneaked out before the slime got here to survive!

Mika started preparing something with the walls around the same time I began weaving a Hand to intercept him...but there was someone else who'd started moving before us.

"No!"

Miss Cecilia threw herself from the alcove and sacked the merman out of the air on his path to me.

"What?!"

"No way!"

Tangled together, the two of them tumbled through the air and dove into the water. They did not instantly melt, but their shadows sank, pulled down by gravity, until they disappeared into the deeper layer that sat beneath. One last bubble floated to the surface and popped, leaving its originator behind.

"Why..."

Strength abandoned me, and I couldn't so much as tell if I was actually standing on the stairs. I mechanically moved my numb legs and took a seat at the edge of the pipe, turning to face the water; Miss Cecilia was not there.

I thought it had to be some sort of mistake—an illusion. Mika and I could have handled it; surely, we would have.

Though, to tell the truth, my lack of breath had left my spellcasting shaky, and Mika's sideways wall-pillar probably wouldn't have caught the full-speed merman in time. I knew that, but... But *this?*

Mika collapsed onto their knees and punched the ground. They stared into the water with dilated pupils, unblinking, with drool dripping from their agape mouth. Their disbelief was as terrible as mine.

We had met her today; saved her on a whimsical conviction; and ran off with her without knowing a single detail. Yet the fact that we had failed to save her was unbelievable.

I was stupefied—there was no other word for it. I cradled my head and asked myself why, over and over again. We were at the end of the end—the final step of the final hurdle—so why? *Why?! How did this...*

A sloshing sound interrupted my thoughts. Someone had stepped on a stair.

Could it be? No, that's preposterous.

I couldn't so much as convince myself to look up, but then the second footstep, and the third, rang out in succession. I was not imagining the sounds.

Very slowly, I began to raise my head. First, I saw feet: they had been thoroughly charred, exposing raw bone to the air. My gaze continued to rise and I saw tattered cloth, more hole than not, barely clinging to whatever flesh was left. Her abdomen was all but gone, and I had a clear, painful view of her internal organs.

Her beautiful chestnut hair and deep burgundy eyes had melted away. She was too horrific to cast eyes upon, and I wouldn't have even recognized her had the Night Goddess's medallion not survived to hang from her neck.

"Ce...cilia...?"

In kind terms, her current state was an atrocity. I only managed to squeak out her name; Mika swallowed their breath and had collapsed once more from their knees onto their rear.

"Oh... Oh no... No, this is terrible. W-We need to find a healer..." Mika put their hands on the floor in an attempt to push themselves to their feet. I didn't know whether it was the slick ground or a general state of shock, but they failed and crashed hard into the metal. They made another attempt, but their inability to process the reality we faced had robbed them of their motor functions.

"Ehh...righ..."

The meat of her neck had been torn away to the brink of severing, and the sounds leaking out from it were... I think it was my name. She was calling for help: pleading for me to save her—to not let her die.

Oh, what do I do? Lady Agrippina—where is Lady Agrippina? If anyone, maybe she can do something...

"Aghhm... Ohhh... Khay..."

She reached me before I could make a single mindful movement. Her fingers had been reduced to exposed bone with gooey flesh stubbornly clinging on, but she still raised her hand to run them across my cheek.

"Aghm... Aye... I'm...okay."

The damage should have been fatal, but my desires must have conjured up a hallucination, because her indecipherable groaning was turning back into regular speech. The gluey bones brushing against my face gained definition and rediscovered their heat.

At last, I realized that I was not dreaming. Her disfigured flesh fell off before my eyes, and her crimson wounds bubbled with muscles that knit her body back together, packaged under a new layer of vivacious skin. She had already been so fair that I had wondered if she'd ever set foot in the sun, but now her complexion was paler still, bordering on a bluish-white that made me question whether she was

alive at all.

Fresh eyeballs pushed out their crumbling predecessors; the brilliant red of pigeon blood stared right back at me.

As her skin reclaimed territory on her charmingly round face, a full head of hair sprouted: not chestnut, but rather the hue of the gentle darkness that surely coated the skies fathoms above us. Her locks had more luster than when they'd been brown, and they shimmered under our mystic lanterns like the starry night.

Yet for all her beauty, her most striking feature remained those unchanging lips—a more brilliant scarlet than any rouge. And peeking out from the gap in between them were a pair of long, pearly fangs.

“Erich, I’m okay. I’m so glad to see you’re safe.”

The priestess had returned from the void of death, and as she wiped away my tears with her thumb, she smiled.

[Tips] Miracle and curse are two sides of the same coin; both are assignments of the divine.



Two Full Hendersons

Ver0.1

2.0 Hendersons

The main story is irreparably busted.
The campaign ends.

The tale that follows is not from the time line we know—but it might have been, had the dice fallen differently...

Two Full Hendersons Ver0.1

2.0 Hendersons

The main story is irreparably busted. The campaign ends.

There once was a mansion in which pitiful victims were turned into wax dolls, fated to cry out for mercy every torturous night—perhaps I'd read it in a poem a lifetime ago. I found myself in a similar position to the keeper of such an estate: perhaps I had become the cryptic old man tasked with luring in sorry young ladies.

A breeze rolled in from the open window and turned a page in my book; only then did I realize that I'd dozed off. I raised my nodding head to see that the elements had stolen quite a number of pages from me, suggesting that I'd been out for some time.

Alas, resisting the realm of dreams is so difficult in old age.

Shaking off my lingering drowsiness, I decided to make sure my workplace was all in order. I set down my book and stood up to a view of countless works of art. Paintings covered the walls, depicting young boys and girls in fantastic outfits and immortalizing their smiling faces. Statues of stone and bronze stood unchanging, as packed full of timeless youth as the day they'd been made.

Every piece in this room had been handcrafted by an expert artisan. Each portrait and carving was so perfect that one might confuse this hall for a vault in the Empire's Central Museum of Fine Arts. Some had been painted by young artists who would go on to become historic masters, while others had been chiseled by the same hand that now shaped the Emperor's official busts; in terms of sheer pricelessness, the collection certainly rivaled the imperial stockpile.

Yet all this had been created to serve the interests of a single person—and what eccentric interests she had. Upon closer inspection, one could easily discern the tastes of this room's owner: after all, the only throughline connecting all these art pieces was the beautiful children.

Newborns snoozed in baby clothes and adolescents celebrated their coming of age in full formal wear, but not a single one remained past the age of fifteen. Some had been physically no different from adults, but their stills had been carefully composed to draw out their lingering innocence.

The owner of this room loved children—in more ways than one.

She loved doting on cute kids, dressing them up in clothes of her design, and having her favorites meet and play with one another. That alone made her sound like a wonderful philanthropist with a penchant for spoiling the young, but one look at the gorgeous figures dancing in these oilworks was enough to refute the thought.

This space belonged to an abnormal soul whose love only reached children of impeccable beauty.

I could find no better descriptor than irredeemable for her hobbies; an impartial observer was liable to furrow their brow, no doubt. Still, I supposed she compared favorably against some of the actual villains that roamed the world, seeing as she never once laid a finger on the objects of her affection—again, in more ways than one.

“Ah... How nostalgic.”

I patrolled about, inspecting the gossamer layers of enchantment protecting each piece from dust and sunlight, until my eyes stopped on a portrait. Newer paintings hung farther back in the room, and I'd traversed at least two full generations' worth of them to return here.

The oil painting was two arm spans across and showed a brother and sister smiling. The girl clad in heaping snow-white frills could be no more than ten; she sat gracefully in a chair, forming the focal point of the piece. The boy laid a hand on her shoulder as he stood beside, dressed in a plain yet classy suit of full black.

I cared little about the boy, but the girl was adorable. The brushstrokes of her hair looked as though they could come alive at any moment, yet still they paled in comparison to the heavenly gold of her true form. Her round, amber eyes were much the same, as the real things shone more brilliantly than gemstones.

Of all those on display, I maintained that she was the cutest. I'd said this for as long as I could remember, and the half century that had passed since this portrait's creation had done nothing to change my mind.

I, however, had changed. The golden hair my sister had once praised now bleached white, and my well-trained body had withered into a shriveled mass of wilting branches. In the end, I never managed to grow a beard, and all that hung off my sorry chin was a flap of pitiful loose skin.

I looked away with a sigh, only to catch my reflection in a glass box guarding a work of art. My gloved fingers ran across the mirrored image of an old, decaying man: my hair was tied up behind my back and a pair of glasses imported from the East adorned my weakening eyes.

Here stood a man once known as Erich from Konigstuhl; then as the honorary student of the leader of the School of Daybreak, Lady Leizniz herself; then by the humiliating name of *The Moonlit One* upon

attaining the title of magus. But all that I saw in the glass now was the seventy-year-old husk that remained in his wake.

I wasn't bemoaning my opportunity to live out my final years in peace. I could no longer keep up with the hour-to-hour bedlam that had plagued me in my youth, and my lust for adventure was simmering down—not that my love of it had disappeared, mind you. Simply put, I'd realized that it wasn't a line of work meant for an old codger like me and put the world of adventure behind me.

How could it be otherwise? I'd taken plenty of traits to resist my decline, but I could never muster the will to fight aging itself. This body of mine was showing more signs of wear with each passing moment.

My knees ached every night, the number of midnight trips to the restroom only ever increased, and three days prior, I'd even lost a tooth. I had managed to keep my entire set until the age of sixty, but had lost three teeth in the past decade alone; I couldn't deny my physical deterioration.

Where I had once wielded Schutzwolfe like my own arm, she now felt heavy in the hand; I hadn't touched her for more than maintenance or simple exercise in gods knew how long. I had been at my prime as a polemurge just past thirty; I had been able to swing her for two days straight and have energy to spare.

The years take such a toll.

I wondered what my youthful self would have thought seeing me now—especially the boy who had sworn to take his childhood friend on a journey around the world.

Looking back now, it was a strange fate: my employer had sold me off for ten years of liberty without a moment's hesitation, and I had begrudgingly acquiesced when the wraith dangled the carrot of Elisa's tuition before my eyes. What had followed was a dazzling display of depravity. I was thrown into more clothes than I could wrap my mind around, taught everything there was to learn, and pushed into bizarre situations with my fellow "favorites" to pose for incomprehensible paintings.

Frankly, my surprise at being promoted from a servant to a magus-hopeful evaporated in the blink of an eye. The moment I became her disciple in both name and fact—as opposed to being her disciple's servant on loan—the woman threw all semblance of reservation out the window.

I had been utterly terrified by the fact that my personal room in her laboratory was chock-full of extravagant costumes that increased in number with every passing day. I could understand wanting to dress up the cutest girl—now the most beautiful woman—in the world, but I hadn't been able to comprehend why she'd wanted to do

the same to me.

In fact, I *still* couldn't understand.

"Erich, are you here?" The door opened without a sound, as was proper etiquette. Although she could have easily slipped right through, physically moving the door was her form of consideration for whoever might be within.

"Ah," I said, "good day to you, Master. Here to soothe your soul?"

Nothing about her had changed: her long, black hair; the motherly twinkle in her drooping eyes; her plump lips; the alluring moles under her eye and mouth; and her voluptuous figure were all precisely the same as the day we'd met over fifty years ago.

Here was my master: Magdalena von Leizniz. The strange vitality-glorifier had made her overbearing affection for me plain at first sight, but continued to keep me by her side in my unseemly old age—all while never changing herself. The wraith was as youthful as the day her fervor had resurrected her from an early death.

"That is one reason," my master answered, "but I also recall asking you to come by my atelier if you happened to be free."

"Oh dear... Did you truly?"

I cocked my head quizzically and pushed up my glasses, but she simply folded her arms and bore her discontent. This was unbecoming behavior for a woman of her standing; I could no longer remember how long ago it had been when she'd abandoned all reservations around me.

"Goodness, you always play senile at times like these," she sighed. "You were taking another nap, weren't you?"

"Please, Master, I would never. To dishonor my own teacher's treasure trove by dozing off is unthinkable. I was hard at work, inspecting the preservation spells on your priceless paintings."

For my part, I had long since gotten used to lying through my teeth without a shred of guilt. At first, I'd practiced to not embarrass my master in aristocratic settings, but my long tenure as a noble in my own right was mostly to blame. High society was a world wherein even a lowly magus unambitious for further bureaucratic sway needed the ability to mix poison into cordiality to survive.

"Oh, you... And here I thought today's fitting would be the perfect occasion to tailor you a new set of clothes."

"Again? What I have now is more than enough for an old sack of bones with not long left to live."

"It's always 'not long left' this and 'withering husk' that with you. I'll have you know that I'm not the least bit worried. With your vigor, I'm sure you'll live another hundred years."

"Have you forgotten, Master? I am but a mensch; a full century would be a marvel to achieve."

That same span could be considered chump change in this world full of immortals, especially when Lady Leizniz herself was nearing three hundred. While I understood that her undying existence had spanned more than ten times the length of her life as a mensch, her hazy perception of mortality did not apply to me.

Although her statement was similar to the sorts of light jokes one might make to humor a dying man, this woman seemed to believe her own words to some extent. Unfortunately for her, I was free from regrets at this point; I couldn't imagine throwing myself into a desperate struggle to cling to this mortal realm.

Elisa had come into her own: Elisa the Ambrosial was renowned as a leading professor by all her peers. In fact, she was the central figure of a subfaction within the Leizniz cadre. While I, of course, would have loved to continue watching over her, her refusal to grace me with any nieces or nephews left me ready for her to move on from clinging to me.

I was content. In my long life, I'd seen off many I held dear. My unchanging connections like Ladies Agrippina and Leizniz were the minority; my case was far more normal. When all was said and done, I was enjoying my twilight years.

"Eternity is too great a burden for me," I said. "This is just enough."

"Hrmph," Lady Leizniz grunted. "Then who will watch over my treasure room for me?"

"Worry not. I've brought up many students who can fill my role without issue. Have you forgotten, Master? It was you who brought all manner of talented children to my doorstep, demanding I tutor them."

I'd probed a weak point of hers, and she had no recourse but to bite her tongue. After a short moment of silence, she folded her arms once more and turned away with a pout.

"Well! How blessed I am to have such a capable apprentice!"

"You are too kind to me, Master. Come now, you must be going soon. I tailored your schedule today around the morning fitting, so your afternoon appointment with Count and Countess Wenders is fast approaching."

"I *knew* you hadn't forgotten! Oh, I can't believe you! You *must* come next time—am I understood?! I won't forget this!"

After her immature outburst, the wraith twirled away and vanished using the ghastly means of teleportation she reserved for when she was out of the public eye.

My goodness, I thought, what a curious life I've come to live.

[Tips] No mensch has ever attained unaging immortality without abandoning their mensch form.

As one of the Five Great Pillars, the Leizniz cadre was an absolute behemoth, but it couldn't quite be considered a singular entity. Like every other faction of its size, it spawned numerous smaller sects like children and grandchildren.

However, not all entered vassalage out of good faith: some swore fealty only to bide their time, knowing it was too difficult to overtake the remarkable individuals at the top. As a result, every so often, a scheme to turn the tides popped up. Under-the-table political conspiracy was the most reasonable of the plots one might encounter; others went straight for blackmail, many resorting to fabricated claims to topple the giants above. But the most extreme cases were those that caused physical harm.

Of course, this didn't entail outright combat with a cadre dean. Setting the optics of violence aside, imperial law allowed for duels. If one filed the paperwork fair and square, challenging an esteemed professor could even be seen as an act of honor. No, the physical harm in question referred to that of assassination and kidnapping.

Though the College turned away the unintelligent, that wasn't to say it didn't have its share of *idiots*. At times, people were born with as much academic talent as they lacked good sense, and such folk were prone to taking matters into their own hands when they got impatient.

And to these knaves, Lady Leizniz's darling children made for the perfect target. After all, she was a perfect altruist like no other, and she tossed boundaries of school and faction aside to care for any prodigal gem she came across, even if they chose not to join her cadre. Seeing as how they were chosen for their apparent talent for magic, her flock was not limited to the heirs of powerful houses.

Young students without official masters who lodged in the capital's low quarters with the pennies they received from their backers at home were all too easy a mark for experienced adults. Once every decade or two, some intelligent magus revealed how ill-versed they were in basic critical thinking.

"S-Sir Dalberg! Sir Dalberg, please help me!"

A barrage of knocks assaulted the door to my well-lived-in home—I couldn't bring myself to move no matter how many times others insisted the place didn't suit my stature—rousing me from my shallow slumber.

I'd nodded off in my armchair reading through the latest collection of arcane treatises. The sheaf of papers had moved from my lap to the table, complete with a bookmark; in its place, a warm blanket wrapped all the way around me despite my never having gotten up. Even as I wasted away, the Ashen Fraulein remained one of the few friends I had left by my side.

I wiped away a bead of drool from my lips and opened the door.

“Thank the gods you’re here, Sir Dalberg! I need your help! You have to help me!”

The boy paying me a visit was almost fully grown. He must have run here at full sprint, judging by his labored breathing and ruffled clothes.

“What has you so worked up at this hour of night? Come in and calm down. We can’t have you making all this noise where people can hear.”

“We don’t have time! They’re gone—everyone’s gone!”

My attempt to bring him indoors did little in the face of his hysteria. Out of options, I decided to employ a short hex.

“Listen well and relax. I won’t be able to help you if you don’t calm down and explain everything clearly. I will count; with every number, you will take a long, deep breath...”

I’d developed this spell in my early days as a teacher to keep my students level headed. Panicking made children and adults alike forget that a rational explanation was a quicker path to understanding than rushing to spit out words.

Mana woven into my voice bade the boy to breathe deeply as I slowly counted. Finally in command of his wits, he rapidly laid out what had occurred; this time, his speed was planned and economical, as opposed to an uncontrolled reaction.

This openhearted lad was one of Lady Leizniz’s current favorites, and his short hair was a rarity among her chosen. He was much like Mika—long ago, we’d run into Lady Leizniz where she practically never went, in a terrible twist of misfortune—in that they had both been swept up by my good master because they’d been caught with a friend she already fancied.

As one might guess from his appearance, he was a lowborn boy. Young and sociable, he made friends wherever he went at the College without paying much heed to factional allegiance or social standing. Naturally, he was close with many of our master’s other favorites, and frequently took them along when he went to play. On one such outing, he stepped away for a moment to buy the group water, only to find all of his friends gone when he returned; though they had all earned Lady Leizniz’s favor, none of those present had particularly strong backing otherwise.

There sure are some awful people out there. If they stopped to think for even a moment, they’d know what’s going to happen next.

I wondered what these fools wanted. Perhaps they hoped to extract information from Lady Leizniz’s students; maybe they were going to use the children as a bargaining chip. It was possible they meant to harm them to send the message that dealing with that

terrible witch would only bring further harm.

Whatever their reasons, they were beyond salvation.

Still, they weren't completely brainless. As inexperienced as the children were, they were still students of the Imperial College; snatching them up without letting the boy catch any glimpse before, during, or after required a good deal of skill. Furthermore, the kidnappers had executed their ploy when Lady Leizniz was away from the capital on business.

I personally attended to my master's schedule to prevent any leaks, so they had either tailed her or had a source from a competing cadre that was attending the same event. It was a shame that all their wit had gone to the most unscrupulous ideas.

"Sir Dalberg, what do I do? Oh, I—I don't know what to do..."

"Don't worry. This old man will take care of everything."

If only these fools would spare my aching bones all this hassle...

[Tips] Magical ability wanes with age similarly to muscles, but is far easier to keep up with diligent exercise.

A handful of children lay gagged and bound in an exceedingly unremarkable warehouse. They'd been changed out of their clothes into sets of dingy rags to guarantee that none of them had access to a hidden catalyst. The attentiveness on display spoke to a single-mindedness that would blot out any possible distraction...but the perpetrators were in a state of frenzy.

"What do you mean this isn't enough? I grabbed all the kids I found!"

"You *imbecile*! I told you, again and again, that there are supposed to be *five* of them—to get *all five* at once! Count them! Or maybe you can't even handle basic arithmetic!"

"What did you just say?!"

As the argument would suggest, there were only four captured children laying on the floor. The whole plan had revolved around the idea that no one other than the kids themselves would bother causing a scene over a few people not returning to the low quarter. Combined with Leizniz's absence from the capital, an opening like this came once in a lifetime; how could the man contain his fury when the plan had gone awry due to sheer incompetence?

Despite Leizniz's absence, her cadre was full of powerful magia. True to Daybreak style, she had more active polemurses than one could count on both hands under her command. If the missing child made their way to the College, the operation was sure to be a bust.

"Dammit. I hate wasting an opportunity this good, but I suppose we'll have to change course..."

“...Should we put them all down? It’ll still be a blow to that damned wraith, and we’ll have enough time to cover everything up if we start now.”

The silver lining of this situation was that the children did not overhear their conversation. They were all in a magically induced coma to prevent any unwanted breaches of information.

Originally, the men had planned to move the children once more to a safe house, where they would use them as hostages to threaten Leizniz. There, the children would be forced into writing letters and recording messages on arcane tools to chip at the dean’s psyche.

The kidnappers weren’t moronic enough to think that would be enough to topple the whole cadre, of course, but the effects would be undeniable. These factions were cults of personality, and any anxiety the charismatic individual at their centers carried was sure to weaken the whole structure. From there, they’d be able to concoct grander and grander schemes against her; these children were meant to be an investment for future conspiracies.

However, they didn’t want to take too many risks in the process. While this warehouse had been carefully prepared with several deceptive barriers to throw off any search spells, a skilled magus would locate them eventually. How much time they had depended solely on whom the runaway child decided to ask for help.

“...Let’s do it.”

“Are you sure? There’s no going back.”

“It’s better than taking undue risks. We’ll have to report that something went wrong, but we should—”

The man stopped midsentence, causing his partner to turn around in confusion. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Grbgh... Hrgh...”

“Hey!” Something was obviously wrong, and the second man rushed over to his companion to shake his shoulders. Up close, he saw blood gush past his friend’s fingers as he desperately gripped at his throat.

Without any fresh blood, the man’s mind could not so much as weave a final spell. As his brain rapidly ran out of fuel, the man’s thoughts ground to a halt until he eventually stopped moving in his friend’s arms.

“N-No... This can’t be!”

The survivor froze up in terror, letting the corpse roll to the floor. Who could blame him? The frightful scene before him ought to have been *impossible*.

It was unthinkable for anyone to have prior knowledge of this location. He’d cut out all middlemen when procuring the warehouse, and had prepared all manner of magic to conceal his presence:

barriers that deflected search spells, bubbles to contain all sound, and an illusory image of an empty space that would deceive anyone using far-sight to peer inside. He'd snatched the children no more than half an hour ago, so there was no possible way for someone to have already arrived.

Furthermore, his late partner was a *professor*. While not quite a polemurge, he had always kept his self-defense a top priority; how on earth had he been slaughtered by a cut to the *front* of his throat?

The cascading impossibilities boiled the man's brain, but he still tried to take the situation in stride. He slipped a well-worn bag of catalysts from his robe sleeve to his hand and began to charge his wand.

This was his ace in the hole. By imbuing a pouchful of scrap iron with his mana, he could fragment the metal into a storm of razors that would rend everything around him asunder. Whether his foe was invisible or too fast for the naked eye, his glittering cloud of iron dust would file everything down like a formless chisel. If the enemy was sturdy enough to resist, their first breath would shred them from the inside out.

Once he activated the dastardly spell, he had absolute confidence that everything in range—that is, the entire warehouse—would be reduced to nothing. His conviction was, in fact, correct: any living being in the room would be sure to die. He'd tested it against the highest-quality barriers countless times, and nothing could impede its destructive power.

But that was only *if* he could activate it.

“Argh... Ugh?”

Just before he could pull the trigger, he felt a light shock on his back. It came with a dreadful cold that quickly became a burning pain that spread throughout his chest. He looked down and saw a shimmering blade sprouting from a bloody opening in his breastplate.

That was the last of him: his heart had split in two like a gourd under a knife, and he could no longer function. As he fell to earth, the sword abandoned him, and one could trace back the blade to a plain handle held by a wrinkled hand, blue veins peeking out from under the skin.

The wielder was clad in a black open-collared jacket and skinny pants that pushed up the contour of his legs. Beneath his outerwear, he wore a shirt of a slightly lighter shade embossed with an intricate pattern. As overwrought as his clothes were, anyone with an eye for magic would know at first glance that they were not for show: the old man's garments had been carefully woven to ward off attacks, whether physical or magical.

“I've lost my touch.”

He flung the blood from his beloved sword and returned it to its sheath with a half-hearted smile. In his heyday, the man had severed heads and pierced hearts with such force that his blade remained unsullied by blood and oil; it was only recently that he had come to appreciate the hydrophobic enchantment of his clothes.

Most of all, the need to drive his foes to the cusp of death just to save a few hostages without injury told the tale of his age. Although he could still collect their heads and preserve their brains for long enough to analyze their memories at his lab, a younger version of him would have been able to keep the kidnappers alive and extract the information he wanted in a far simpler manner.

"The years take such a toll," he sighed. Pushing up his hair, his eyes turned to the ceiling, still as blue as ever.

"My." A figure appeared, soaking into reality from the darkness of the night. Her silver hair drifted in space, her mothlike wings fluttered, and she wrapped both arms around the man's neck with a whisper. "I happen to think this to be quite the accomplishment."

"Not even trying to hide your flattery, I see. You know better than anyone else how I was in my prime."

"You're certainly not the same as when you were young and strong. But I believe you to be most beautiful as you are now. Isn't that so?"

"Yaaawn... You said it, Ursula."

The response came from the man's crown. His once-golden locks now shimmered a lunar silver, and they'd been braided into a tight nest—one inhabited by an elf who looked like a spring day decided to dress up in a green one-piece.

Ursula and Lottie had been friends with the old man since before he had grown old; unlike the other fairies who had lost interest in his maturing body, these two had remained by his side. Tonight, they had answered his call to help him save a group of children.

Alfar could only be warded off by charms or scents specifically designed to impede them, so the sylphid had traced her quarry's scent on every breeze in town. Her svartalf companion had then pulled her champion into the night, blinding those who attempted to play in her domain. Their fey mischief was beyond the realm of man-made barriers and dodged the sense of sight mortals relied so heavily on.

Despite his success, the old man felt diminished by his reliance on his longtime friends. Perhaps he would have needed them as a naive teenager, but by the time he hit his twenties, he'd taken care of matters like this all on his own.

I've grown so pathetic.

Yet to hear from these lovers of permanence that he was most beautiful as he was now left the man feeling as though his seventy

years had been anything but poorly spent. At the end of the day, he'd made it in time: if his exhaustion could buy these boys and girls a chance to enjoy their youths, that was a cheap price to pay.

[Tips] Brains continue to function for a few minutes after the heart stops.

Upon hearing what had happened while she'd been away, my master placed a hand to her cheek and sighed.

"Is something not to your liking, Master?"

"...Erich, I know I may have entrusted you with full discretion in my absence, but that doesn't mean you have to solve every issue on your own. Aren't you the one always saying not to push your aging body too hard?"

"Ah, but this is hardly anything worth noting."

I kept a straight face as I spoke, but in truth, it had been backbreaking work. I'd lugged home two idiots while artificially keeping their brains from shutting down entirely and painstakingly extracted all their memories about the conspiracy and the mastermind behind it. Afterward, I'd used my own personal contacts to get in and completely uproot the group pulling the strings—this was hard work for someone turning seventy-one in the fall.

And yet I had managed. I would not let them hurt those children and drag this woman's name through the mud. I was painfully aware of just how irredeemable a pervert Magdalena von Leizniz was, but I also owed this pervert more than I could ever repay. She had offered me a path to becoming a magus, handed me the secrets of psychosorcery, and introduced me to countless cherished friends.

But most of all, she had loved me. One might think it odd that she had chosen to keep me by her side past my coming of age and continued to shower me with gifts alongside her other favorites, but I knew why. Although her rebirth had undeniably warped her tastes beyond repair, she truly loved each and every one of us.

In all likelihood, I hadn't brushed her heartstrings in any particular manner; she had simply kept me around because she'd worried for me. To a wraith with two centuries under her belt, a boy whose talents let him accomplish more or less anything he set his mind to so smitten with adventure had seemed to her a disaster waiting to happen.

Her vast wealth of experience was something I wouldn't fully comprehend in this lifetime, and it had produced this conclusion: if she let me roam free, I would certainly face challenges that would push me to my very limit, and I would risk my life to overcome them.

Lady Leizniz was too kind. She couldn't bear to let me run

headfirst into danger, and instead fastened me here—if nothing else, she wanted for me to only set off when I was older, wiser, and less liable to let my cockiness lead me to ruin. In the end, here I remained. People I had considered more talented than me had died or retired left and right, but even at seventy, I stubbornly refused to return my professorship; even now, she kept me by her side.

This was more than I could ever ask. She continued to dote on her adult students long after she stopped tailoring their clothes, but I alone had the privilege of remaining here. For all my complaints, I too had grown up to the point of old age; had I truly been unhappy, I wouldn't have stayed all these years.

I had no doubt she'd seen through my clumsy act long ago; why else would she accept me without comment?

"Very well," she sighed. "I don't want you to push yourself, but I won't trample over your goodwill either. Thank you for all your efforts, Erich."

"Shooing away the insolent fools who would snip at my master's darling flowers is hardly worthy of thanks."

"Allow me to offer you a reward. Is there anything you'd like?"

"Please. The greatest reward is serving you."

I held back a snicker at how overblown my line was. I supposed it was worth saying, seeing as how my master laughed in my stead.

"I see. Then in its place, I shall punish you for putting yourself in danger without my knowing."

Huh?!

"Wha—wait, Master, please!"

"You deserve it all the more for refusing my generous reward. And here I was, ready to let you sleep on my lap with a nice pat on the head."

"I'm a seventy-year-old coot with great-grandchildren! What on earth are you going to do to me?!"

"No matter how old you get, you're the same little boy I first met! You *always* ignore my warnings not to push yourself, and you still risk your life just because you think you can get away with it! You can be seventy or even one hundred for all I care—you're the same bad boy as ever!"

What kind of ridiculous logic is that? I know I'll never match you in age, but this is just absurd.

"As for your sentence... You *have* to come to the next fitting!"

"Master, have mercy!"

"Certainly not! I've already given Elisa the date, so you'll be in a world of hurt if you don't show up!"

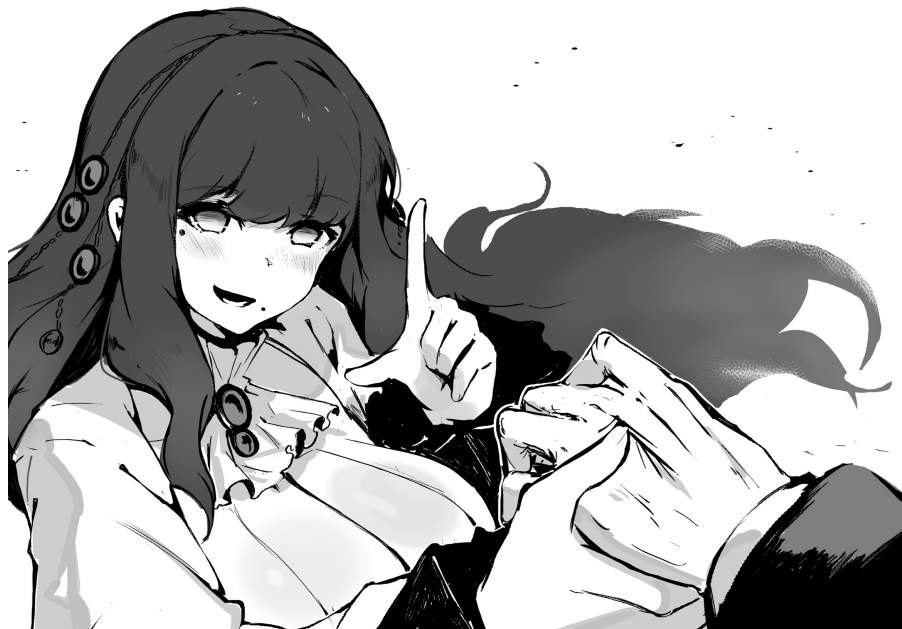
"You have to be joking!"

Never mind, she was a pervert after all—an incorrigible pervert of

the worst degree. I was sure to spend my days honoring and cursing this unchanging master of mine until the day I drew my last.

But until then, I was going to keep fighting the good fight. *Maybe I can get out of this if I can sync up all my geriatrics on the same day...*

[Tips] While the thought of applying the concept of a “life span” to beings that have already once died is peculiar, current consensus simply lists wraith life spans as “unconfirmed.”



Afterword

First and foremost, I dedicate this book to my grandmother for all her years of support. A year is quick to pass, and I've found myself accustomed to life after her great retirement, though pangs of sadness and loneliness still remain. Even now, there are too many things I can't bring myself to throw away.

Next, I offer my deepest thanks to each and every one of my readers who graces me with the water of their impressions to prevent me from wilting; my patient editor who never raises their voice at my tardiness; and Lansane, who graces my humble world with beautiful illustrations.

I know it has been nearly half a year since the previous installment, and I am grateful beyond belief for all of those who have taken this book in hand.

Setting my routine rounds of thanks aside, I have cause for celebration. Not only have I been cleared for a fourth volume, but the fourth arc of this tale has been split into two—with this half boasting the largest page count to date.

Combined with the cleanup following volume three—which I'd put off because the page count had been as impressive as ever—the Familial Troubles Arc (working title) would have been far too long. Wanting to make space for new revisions and content, I suggested a two-book structure to my editor, who successfully managed to foo—ahem, my editor pulled off their Fast-Talk check and got the okay from the higher-ups.

That, or perhaps my comment about how my current work would produce a minimum of six hundred pages had been enough to succeed in Persuasion. Maybe my proposal had been the better of two evils when compared with pushing Japanese printing companies to their limits; whatever the case, my difficult request has been indulged.

My editor did admittedly question me with glazed eyes on whether I had any intention of completing the story in two books upon seeing over four hundred final pages in the first half alone. I couldn't deny that my plan had been partially motivated by the promise of double the Lansane illustrations, but I truly wished to avoid charging over a thousand yen for a single paperback.

Now, I'm aware that the print publications often spur my readers to post comments online about my wanton additions to the text, but I

have added even more than expected this time around; I suspect this is some sort of unconscious reaction to the conservative hand I employed in volume three. Though the overarching plot remains the same, the numerous additions have given rise to something completely different.

Specifically, I speak of the circumstances surrounding Miss Cecilia. In truth, I'd wanted to go down this route when first writing for the web novel, but I couldn't quite manage to perfect the details—or perhaps I simply forgot to read through my own plot—and shelved the whole thing.

Since I had pages to spare, I figured that it was time to dig up the deceased ideas hiding in the graveyard of my mind to put them to work like animated corpses. I don't suppose there are any upstanding eccentrics who would start reading this volume from the afterword, but I shall leave the finer details untouched to avoid spoiling the experience.

Suffice it to say, I simply believe that even the most ardent web readers will find themselves turning their heads more often this time. I hope you will all enjoy comparing and contrasting this final text to the original story.

Moving on, I originally began the web novel with the idea of dedicating one session to each heroine, bringing them all together in Erich's time as an adult. However, this ended up causing those who appeared earlier on to see a disappointingly long period of absence in the meantime. I now consider this a great missed opportunity, and have added more scenes with Elisa and Mika as a direct result. Unfortunately, Margit's physical location prevents her from joining the cast, but I plan to add a great deal of episodic material to the next volume; with any luck, I hope to satisfy those who miss the arachne's presence.

Margit is a heroine, after all—and one tied to Erich by their earrings at that. It wouldn't be fair to let him be the only one in danger, would it?

In the second half of this volume, I also hope to delve more deeply into the churches that have popped up throughout the story thus far, and the gods they extol. Where Erich shied away from Faith skills after likening the heavens to a shady workplace, Miss Cecilia is a devout believer. I prioritized forward progress in the web version, but now is my chance to deliver a richer tale through text.

When I work on depicting things that do not exist on Earth, or at least exist in very different forms, I ask myself, *What do the people of this world think about this?* Alongside the biological diversity of peoples, I believe their religious practices are paramount among the things I can consider. Trying to imagine rituals of worship in a land

where higher beings make their presence unambiguously known is difficult, but incredibly fun.

I, like many in Japan, find myself rather removed from religion: not atheistic, so to speak, but rather I uphold a casual acceptance of spirituality without aligning with any particular dogma. The idea of holistic faith worthy of dedicating one's life to is something I can only imagine through reading literature, but trying to visualize a world wherein the gods will extend their hands to their most zealous believers is enjoyable indeed.

Holy wars as we know them would never occur. Leaving the first three aside, a catastrophe like the Fourth Crusade would cause any god to go ballistic. To use the deity's name to further their own interests by turning on fellow worshippers in this world would incur more than just the wrath of the god: the mastermind would be smote where he stood, and apostles would round up all those that followed him. Those who remained pious would surely go on to speak of the travesty for generations, just as they record a verse in their holy text.

Speaking of which, holy texts in such a world would be radically different. There would be no need to bludgeon others over the interpretation of a divine quote here or there, and ecumenical councils would be unnecessary. The concurrence would also mean believers of the same god wouldn't be driven away as heretics.

Furthermore, I suspect the heavens would be unwilling to forgive self-described holy men refusing the spread of their teachings in vernacular tongues to maintain their social status. The history of Earth has countless examples of such men abusing the illiteracy of their faithful to line their own pockets. If nothing else, the gods of this series have powers proportional to the devotion of their followers; any fool that would impede that source of might would be swiftly and directly brought down by Their hands.

Huh. Now that I spell it out, they sort of sound like the yakuza. The god is the mob boss, and the clergy are the hustlers who collect their dues from the faithful on their turf. The government calls in a few favors to keep their position comfortable... Oh dear, this is a better analogy than I'd thought.

Well, I ought to think it through and flesh it out in the second canto as opposed to this afterword. I believe the biggest appeal of reincarnation as a trope is how it gives us reactions from a character with sensibilities similar to our own when faced with an altogether alien culture; my wish is to come up with an entertaining way of presenting that dynamic.

As of the time of writing, it is May 31, 2021, and Osaka has announced extensions to its period of self-quarantine. Yet again, I find myself sighing over another ill-fated release date. Looking back, I feel

as though the coronavirus has haunted me since the release of volume one.

From what I hear, the shift from web novel to print publication—for so-called Narou series, that is—will eventually see more sales from passersby glancing at the cover than from readers of the original uploads. I'd been confused: weren't they releasing this to capitalize on an existing audience? But apparently, that isn't the case, and a spot in a real bookstore is worth more than I'd accounted for. With that in mind, I can't help but feel as though this series has come out in a trying time.

Speaking of trying times, the same can be said of my beloved board games, card games, and TRPGs. Practically every event has been canceled, and I can hardly find any opportunity to try out a new release with my friends.

As the main pastime I drowned myself in years ago and the original impetus for my writing, the inability to indulge in tabletop games is seriously taxing. Worse still, the overwhelming nihilism that fills my heart when I gaze at the pile of games I've yet to try is astounding.

New online services have popped up, but—call me old-fashioned if you will—I haven't been able to get over my desire to play at a real table, in person. Without any means of playing, my days have been spent flipping through rulebooks and scenarios, scribbling out characters with the muted longing to use them to ruin a GM's day.

I pray more than anything else that these days of cooping ourselves up in our homes will end, and we'll return to the table to laugh and curse over the mystifying world of dice.

Once again, I thank all of you who have gone out of your way to purchase this book in times as hard as these. I believe I'll be able to bring you the second half of volume four far more quickly than I did the first; a direct continuation like this has to come out before the setup is forgotten.

Last but not least, this series has begun publication overseas: I believe it's already on sale in Taiwan, with Korea and North America to follow. I may come off as detached, but that's because my editor is less directly involved, and I personally am far removed from finer details of the worldwide releases; I don't quite have the full picture.

Regardless, I would be overjoyed if the series continued to spread internationally, and happier still if that helped secure a manga or anime adaptation. That said, I'm not very well versed in looking myself up online, so I haven't been able to pick up many comments made from readers abroad.

Hrm... Maybe it's this long title. Or maybe I really am just bad at searching. While it's difficult to determine which is the truth, I can

only hope to connect with my global readers going forward.

With all that said, I shall close this afterword with an earnest prayer that, as always, we might meet again in the second half of this volume.

[Tips] The author uploads side stories and world-building details to @Schuld3157 on Twitter as “extra replays” and “rulebook fragments.”





4

Canto I

Author
Schuld
Illustrator
Lansane

Henderson Scale

The “Henderson” referenced in the subtitle is Old Man Henderson, a Western tabletop legend.

Famed for overcoming a blood-thirsty GM to miraculously tie up the story he appears in, he has since become a measuring stick for how derailed a campaign can get.

Min-Maxing My TRPG Build in Another World

Preach the Good Word
of Mr. Henderson

In the words
of Lady Agrippina,
these were vain castles
in the capital of vanity;
yet, at times, that gilded
vener was what swayed
men's hearts.

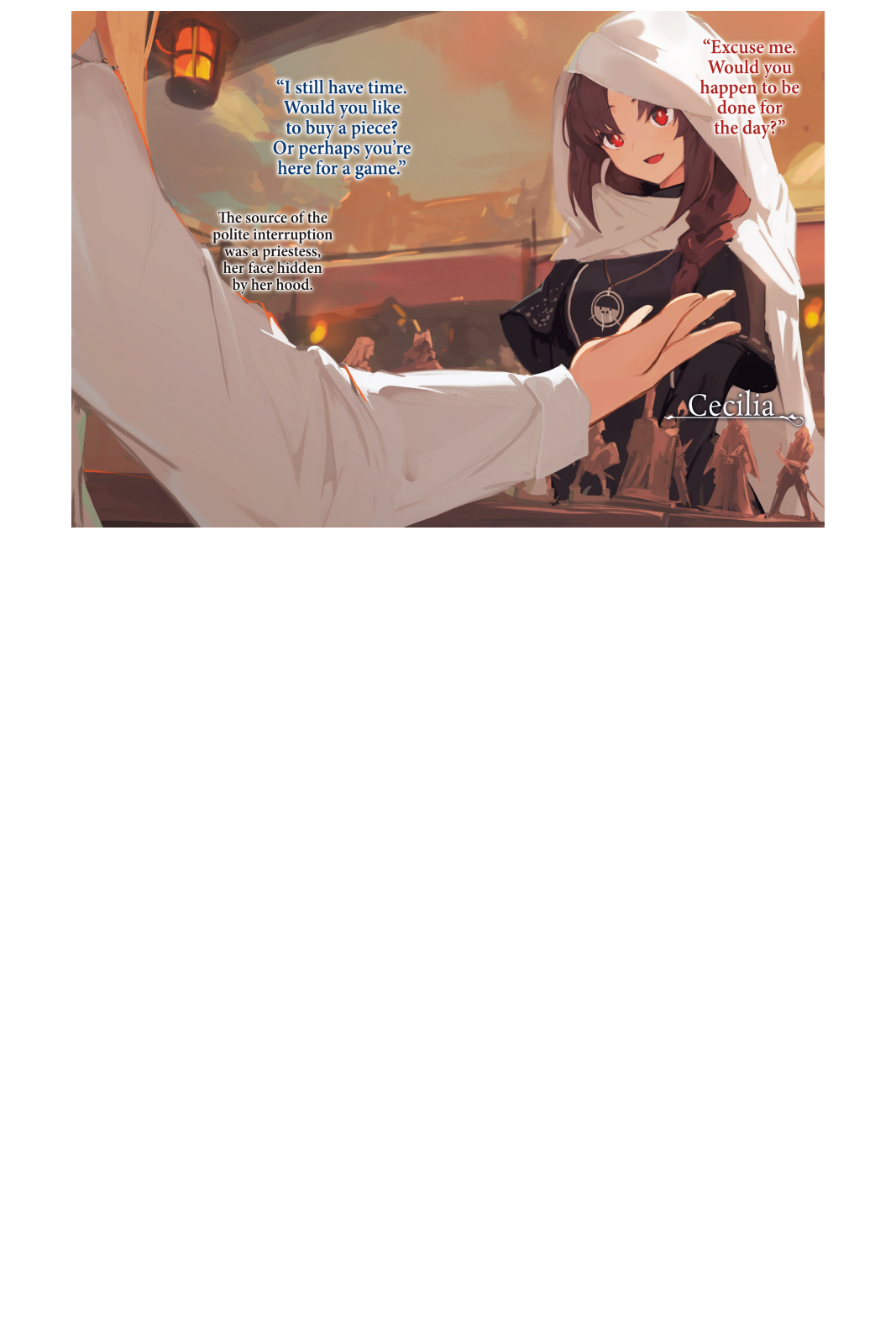
"Wow...
Look at
that, Elisa."

"Pretty! Pretty,
Dear Brother!"

Elisa

Erich



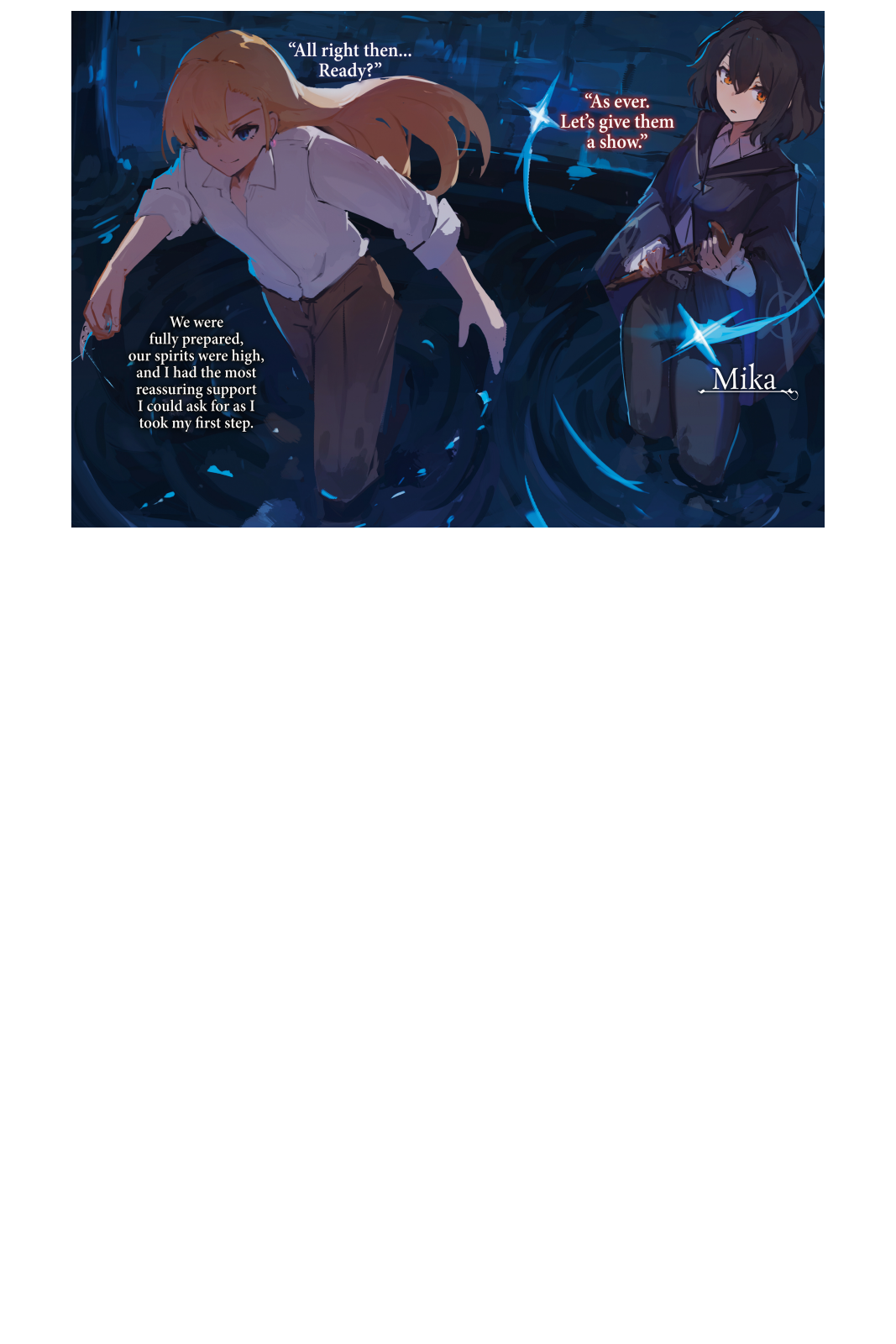


“I still have time.
Would you like
to buy a piece?
Or perhaps you’re
here for a game.”

The source of the
polite interruption
was a priestess,
her face hidden
by her hood.

“Excuse me.
Would you
happen to be
done for
the day?”

Cecilia



“All right then...
Ready?”

“As ever.
Let’s give them
a show.”

We were
fully prepared,
our spirits were high,
and I had the most
reassuring support
I could ask for as I
took my first step.

Mika

CHARACTER

Name

Cecilia

Race

Mensch?

Classification

Connection

Specialties

[REDACTED]

Skills

- ◆ Night Goddess Piety
- ◆ [REDACTED]
- ◆ [REDACTED]

Traits

- ◆ [REDACTED]



CHARACTER

Name

Elisa

Race

Changeling

Classification

Connection

Specialties

Mana Capacity [REDACTED]

Skills

- ◆ [REDACTED]
- ◆ Upper Palatial Speech
- ◆ Upper Palatial Etiquette

Traits

- ◆ Fey Soul
- ◆ [REDACTED]'s Blessing
- ◆ [REDACTED]



Bonus Short Stories

A World for Two

You know, I think I've spent more time messing with ehrengarde pieces than using a hoe or quill. Such were the young student's thoughts as he watched his friend from across the board.

His playing partner's effeminate features were pulled tight, and those eyes bluer than the summer sky squinted in deep thought. For once, he looked thoroughly stumped: his jaw rested on his hand with a lone finger pushing up into his cheek.

The northern winters were long and harsh. As a result, the denizens of the Empire's remotest reaches spent the season counting their days to spring while doing what work could be done indoors; tabletop games were the perfect escape from the dreary monotony.

Having grown up in a small canton that practically amounted to a few huts buried in the polar snow, Mika was no exception to this rule. He'd spent almost all his free time back home playing inside with his family. Of all the games he'd played, ehrengarde was the cheapest to play and most difficult to grow tired of—losing streaks notwithstanding—so he had naturally racked up enough hours to be able to envision entire matches without a board or pieces.

It went without saying that he was a strong player. He hadn't gotten much chance to play people outside his family on account of the stigma against tivisco, but his recorded losses were only in the single digits.

Across the board from him now sat the servant to a College researcher: Erich, too, was quite the player. While unfamiliar with by-the-book tactics or recent trends, he was blessed with a mind both deep and swift. His style of play wasn't backed by theoretical knowledge or technical expertise, but a simple intellect, which meant his strength did not wax and wane with the different strategies he faced. Frankly, Mika thought he made for a difficult opponent.

Yet the current state of their game was enough to perplex him. The center of the board had devolved into chaos: among the immaculately designed wooden pieces clashing across the board, both their emperors were inches away from locking blades.

This situation had arisen purely because Mika was trying to complicate things to brew confusion. To be fair, Erich's early consolidation of his major pieces in the middle to take board control

had forced Mika's retaliation. Still, it wasn't as if the fledgling oikodomurge had marched his emperor in with reckless abandon.

Although the emperor was the piece that ultimately decided the victor, it was more than a worthless noncombatant that needed protection. Its ability to move omnidirectionally—albeit one tile at a time—made it highly versatile. So long as it was protected properly, it made for a strong attacker.

Mika knew one didn't *need* an empress to make use of their emperor, so he'd used his to tip the mid-board gridlock slightly in his favor. Erich couldn't afford to pull back now and regroup his forces; he had no choice but to march forward knowing the danger that awaited.

With both emperors only a step away from walking into enemy lines, the game was exhilaratingly close. Had any connoisseur of the sport been around to watch, they surely would have been deeply impressed with both players' competitive spirit: very rarely could one tell so clearly that both participants were adamant on dominating their opponent through a full frontal assault.

This had all started after Erich showed off his work and invited his best friend to join him in selling pieces. He had then suggested a friendly bout meant to foster bonds and whatnot, and no self-respecting ehrengarde lover could refuse the chance to play with tiny figurines packed with such lifelike detail, so Mika had agreed.

And look where they were now.

In some ways, the game could be considered a contest of egos. By playing, one announced to the world that *this* was the way they liked to play; every stray motion divulged more than a palm reading ever could. At times, this mental connection surpassed even that of the flesh.

Ehrengarde's infamy for becoming *more* difficult against players one knew well proved that the poets' insistence on parallels to the sensual were no mere dramatization. After all, Mika had begun to grasp what sort of plays Erich was liable to pursue.

Erich, in turn, was stuck in the pits of his mind trying to avoid the lines he figured Mika would want to see: he was struggling to figure out how to deal with the guardsman by the emperor's side. Guardsmen were powerful pieces—so powerful that only one could be used—that were invincible so long as they stayed in front of their monarch, but this one had exposed itself. If he took it now, he would certainly have a better chance at vying for the center, but the only pieces in position to strike it down were his keystone pieces.

The knight, dragon knight, and general in range were all powerful units that exerted pressure just by being there; this also meant that losing one was a blow incomparable to sacrificing a minor piece. Any

piece that created tension with its presence alone was sure to leave an even greater hole once gone.

Taking the guardsman meant losing a major piece, and Erich would need to form his plans around counterattacking after it was gone. But to leave the guardsman up would inevitably mean committing an extra piece or two to attacking the emperor anyway, which was hardly any better.

Mika knew he would have been just as indecisive had he been in his shoes, which made the situation all the sweeter. However, there was something that gave him even greater joy: for this brief moment, the whole of Erich's attention was devoted to the tactician across the board—for now, Mika had him all to himself.

“Okay,” the young magician said. “Thirty more seconds.”

“Ugh... Argh...”

Reversed, it also meant that Mika was all Erich's. As he flipped over the small hourglass, the trickster began to plot his next move.

[Tips] Ehrengarde is enjoyed all across the Empire, but it is well established that the density of strong players positively correlates with latitude. Common wisdom tells that this is because there are few other activities engaging enough to last the frigid winters.

The Curtains Rise at the Seamstress's

Satin glossier than a shimmering lake; velvet that threatened to swallow you whole; silk flowing more freely than water; linen to bring the mind home with its earthy tones; cotton softer than the clouds dyed in every hue; wool as warm as it was lustrous; lace so transparent it was frightening; beads strung into dazzling accessories; and frills, which were the absolutely essential cherry on top.

The fitting room was the crystallization of all that a young girl might adore, but one young girl couldn't help but find herself terribly bored. She didn't care about the satin cloth that sparkled like candy drops on her shoulder, nor the pleasant chill of the silk wrapping around her thigh, nor even the mysterious see-through fabric that she didn't understand how anyone could make. None of it really mattered to her.

I wonder why they all care so much.

“Augh... Too...precious! I could pass on right this very instant!”

“Lady Leizniz, stay with us! But...you do have a point. She's incredible!”

“Ohh, and look at this little face of hers! It says, ‘I don't get it,’ plain and square. Cute! And! Cuter!”

Elisa was in the northern parts of Berylin reserved for the upper crust, in a clothing store that turned away all but the highest of upturned noses, sitting in a lavish chair as she vacantly stared at the women putting their peculiar hobbies on display.

Seamstresses though they were, each commanded the highest dialect of palatial speech as naturally as they breathed; these were no mere journeymen. Not only did they possess technical skill and an eye for fashion, but all of them had been hand-picked with consideration to their peerage and character. In fact, among the handful of humanfolk were some *immortals*—one could scarcely expect to see such a person working needles in a city outside the Empire, capitals included.

The patron in the center of the room who'd buried her face in her hands out of emotional overload was a few shades more translucent than usual. Let us hide nothing: here squirmed the founder and continued leader of the Empire's foremost pillar of magecraft, the Leizniz cadre of Daybreak.

Not even an imperial princess could expect to have all of these fine ladies wait on her so. Seeing Elisa's treatment would drive all the women of the Empire to chew straight through their handkerchiefs in envy, but the changeling felt not an ounce of joy atop the throne where they had placed her.

Her outfit had been suddenly made to order upon reporting that she was going to the festival, and she'd been dragged to this fitting fit for more than royalty before she'd known it. Yet no matter how many times Elisa peered into the big mirror they'd prepared, it didn't quite click with her.

The girly dress was white at the collar and otherwise dyed a dignified maroon. Upon closer inspection, she could see that the whole thing was covered in elaborate embroidery in a marginally different shade of red—even on the inside. Her skirt had a rare shape to it—contracting inward near the hem—and was also covered in red and black needlework, to say nothing of the gratuitous attachment of frills along every ridge. The black apron attached to it had been specially designed for this outfit in particular, and was altogether removed from its original protective purpose.

Elisa particularly disliked the constrictive feeling of tights; the ones she was wearing now paradoxically managed to be black and somewhat transparent. They, of course, had just as much intricate decoration as the rest, visible through the varying degrees of shade across the cloth. They slipped into tight shoes with raised heels that made her terribly irritable when she tried to walk.

However, the girl was slowly but steadily growing up. She knew that she had no say in the matter, and that her circumstances were

meant to be a thing envied by others.

Yet knowledge did little to assuage her: to Elisa, the only garb fit for an outing at the festival was Mama's handmade flaxen dress. Simple as it was, it was wonderfully colored, comfortable to wear, and the edges had ivies and grasses her beloved mother and sister-in-law had woven in.

They don't get it at all. Elisa sighed quietly enough to avoid attention, just as she'd been taught.

"Will this do, Lady Leizniz?" From beyond the curtain, she heard her brother's voice. She turned to see him dressed up in a wondrous outfit.

One glance was enough to make the boy out as an aristocrat's dependable steward. Fanciful patterns altogether different from her own embroidery danced across his black shirt, and his matching pants accentuated the long legs of his slender build. The double-breasted vest on top had silver threads running through it, giving the whole look a stern yet graceful finish.

Had the full black set been placed on a mannequin, it would have surely been grim and dingy; yet the boy's fair skin and blinding hair paired with it to create a gorgeous combination. He had a touch of makeup on—part of the rehearsal, apparently—that blurred the lines as to whether he was lad or lass, and his golden locks had been woven into a complicated braid that draped behind him.

"Eeeeeee!"

"L-Lady Leizniz?!"

"Look! Marvel at how he's turned out! Isn't he perfect?! He's the epitome of a loyal retainer!"

"This outfit has your inclinations written all over it! It's *amazing!* I want him to come and model for us!"

"A miracle like this deserves an entire country as its prize!"

Elisa ignored the sickening reactions of those around her and instead stared at her fidgeting brother. A thought crossed her mind: according to her master, she would one day become a noble upon attaining professorship. Unigenerational nobles received additional benefits to the baseline research stipends of the College, and the most noteworthy could even hope to be awarded land and the permission to pass on their peerage to offspring.

Leizniz's contributions had obviously netted her a position of hereditary nobility—not that she could produce a successor—which was why she had so much spare change to do as she pleased.

Elisa realized something: if she, too, attained such status, then would she not be able to do as *she* pleased? Her brother's grumbling about shame, humiliation, and bullying never ceased when they were due for a fitting, but she quite liked how he looked in these clothes.

Perhaps the dean had a keen eye when it came to fashion.

If all goes well, then I can do it too...

All that showed on the surface of the girl's dark fantasies was a reserved smile—prim and proper, as had become her habit.

"You look very handsome, Dear Brother."

As the boy teared up at hearing his sister's words of consolation, the girl's mind drifted to the future. *What would I have him wear?*

[Tips] Leizniz's favorite clothier is a store well known among true connoisseurs for being run by the best of the best. Rumor has it that status or fortune alone will not afford entry; the master of the shop selects clientele on a rigorous test of taste.

Few can claim acquaintance with this enigmatic tailor who has even turned away a princess, but judging from the location's continued survival, it would seem that they are of exceptional pedigree.

Permanence and Peppermint

Cut, arrange, and bite. Take care to produce no noise, to not let the tiniest morsel of food stick out, nor to allow your cheeks to puff—the act of eating is an exercise in restraint. Chew silently and swallow much the same, finishing off with an elegant smile.

How much meaning did these dispassionate actions carry to a woman who would not die in the face of hunger and thirst? Apathy swelled beneath Agrippina du Stahl's dainty smile; such were the wandering thoughts of a detached methuselah after one hundred and fifty years of life.

Interpersonal relationships were a must in society, no matter how tiresome Agrippina found them. Every so often, she found herself sharing a meal with one of her contacts at the College or a noble who had ties to her parents back home. It all tied back to eliminating further bothers: she may have been a lazy homebody of the highest degree, but she had wherewithal enough to make small efforts against future trouble. When the situation arose, she was willing to partake in a meal at an acquaintance's residence or play the part of a good pen pal.

Agrippina's usual diligence made the blunder from twenty years prior all the more painful. She had thought her preparations flawless from how she'd managed to keep the librarians at bay while burrowing in their vault of books, but hadn't been able to predict an outburst of raw fury from the dean of her own cadre. If she had, she wouldn't have been exiled to two decades of time that even *she* considered unproductive.

“Mm,” she said. “This is scrumptious, Count Witt. Your specially reared beef is preceded by its immaculate reputation, and yet I am surprised by how wonderful it tastes every time I visit.”

“Receiving such high praise from someone of your caliber may mean the flattery of the rabble has some substance yet, Lady Stahl. Perhaps I shall package some meat for your father back home to sample.”

“I am sure he would be delighted.”

The methuselah’s countless strands of thought divided up the burden of her ill will, and one in particular effortlessly produced political niceties devoid of any true affection. The man before her was but a weapon: one of her benefactors with ties to the Kingdom of Seine. Keeping his loyalties to the Kingdom strong was part of serving her own interests.

Still, she found this whole affair curious. She had grown tired of the stimulation running across her tongue within a decade of coming of age, and hadn’t given the realm of flavor much thought ever since. Hers was a fountain of life that never dried, but this was proof enough that epicurean taste and full stomachs could not provide eternal delight so long as she remained within the realm of the conscious.

Agrippina couldn’t comprehend why this man went to such lengths for his cows: he prepared specialized diets and spent all hours of the day planning around them, not to mention his constant use of a mountain of grain large enough to sustain several farming families and then some. All his work only amounted to beef that tasted better than other beef.

While she would not deny that the gustatory reactions of her taste buds were sending signals of rich flavor to her brain, the cognitive effect produced only impacted one of her many parallel psyches. Compared to that of lesser races, her ego was a leviathan unknowable—too gargantuan for something so simple to sate.

That said, some of her own kind found the act of eating amusing enough that they constricted all of their thoughts into a single strand to immerse themselves in the realm of taste; truly, the world was vast. Whatever the case may be elsewhere, Agrippina successfully gave her lip service and safely completed her mission. With her tedious yet important chores done, she left the manor behind her.

“Welcome back, madam. Shall we head straight home?”

“Yes, let us be off.”

The sun had long since set and the moon hung high in the stars. A familiar carriage and manservant dressed in proper butler’s attire awaited her just outside the mansion’s front gate. The brother of Agrippina’s ticket back to Berylin showed no signs of weariness at his long wait for her.

Thinking back, their meeting was also a rather peculiar thing. The methuselah had traveled with a caravan to some remote village for their business, only to stumble across a changeling who came with a brother who seemed legitimately useful. What were the odds of that?

Subordinates that could be trusted to perform their duties to a tee were few and far between. Although her family only had the lowly rank of a barony, they were so immensely wealthy that their influence rivaled the royal crown; naturally, all of their help were the cream of the crop. She had come to scarcely rely on anyone after mastering the mystic arts, but the presence of a reliable retainer was always a convenience.

“...If I may be so forward, madam.”

“Hm? What is it?”

After returning to her atelier and having the boy fetch a comfortable set of nightwear, Agrippina had been ready to crawl into her beloved hammock. Just then, her servant came up to her with a small stick in his hand.

He was holding out a lollipop; the young Erich from Konigstuhl had a fittingly inexpensive piece of candy in hand. Although it would sell highly abroad, the sugar produced in the Empire’s satellite states made such treats a common sight among even the poorest children who had any concept of fiscal planning.

It was a standard snack: melted sugar had been combined with vinegar or some other flavoring and then hardened around a stick. The magus knew not why the boy had offered it, but she had no particular reason to refuse, and stuck it into her mouth.

Agrippina’s eyes went wide. The cheap peppermint-infused lollipop was so delicious that she couldn’t help but devote a handful of her consciousnesses to it. The fruit sorbet that she’d eaten for dessert had still not been enough to wash away the heavy aftertaste of her supper, and the lingering oils made the refreshing mint all the more pleasing. Not even the brilliant methuselah could have predicted something worth pennies at most would be the first food to truly strike her fancy in decades.

“Dinner seemed to have left a bad taste in your mouth,” the boy explained.

He went on to elaborate that he had bought it only because Elisa had wanted them to match earlier in the day; from his nonchalance, Agrippina surmised that this flavor was considered a bog-standard palate cleanser. And, since it was so common, her servant had offered it to her after picking up on the minute signs of displeasure that seeped through her aristocratic poker face.

New discoveries come at every age, I suppose. Agrippina’s expression did not change as she pulled the candy out of her mouth and said, “I

see. Thank you.”

The cheap flavor of mint and the jagged edges forming in her mouth heralded the end. If she rolled her tongue around it a few more times, it would shrink again, and eventually disappear...

Just like the hurried lives of mortals.

They, too, remained by her side for a short while—lifetimes that amounted to momentary stimulation. By and large, they were as forgettable as the meal she’d partaken in tonight; but now and again, they produced waves that would ripple on as pleasant echoes in her memory.

As Agrippina watched her servant clean up the busywork that followed an outing, she toyed with the lollipop in her mouth, savoring it to the last.

[Tips] Starving cannot directly cause death for a methuselah.

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by Schuld

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